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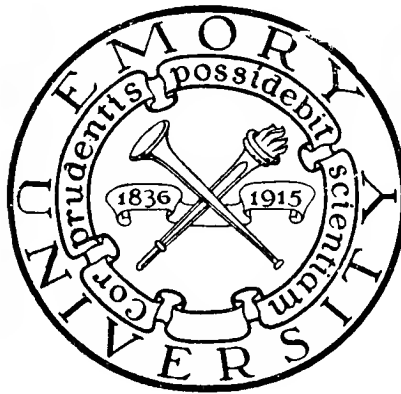
Miss Cord Berresford



By the Author of "Molly Bawn"

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LOÿS, LORD BERRESFORD

AND OTHER TALES

BY THE AUTHOR OF

‘PHYLLIS’ ‘MOLLY BAWN’ ‘MRS GEOFFREY’

&c.

A NEW EDITION

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LOÏS, LORD BERRESFORD.

CHAPTER I.

SIR JOHN BLAKE is the lord and master of Vesey Court; and Vesey Court itself is one of the most picturesquely beautiful places in the whole of our broad England. Sir John is one of the finest, freshest, most hot-tempered, and most forgiving old gentlemen in Christendom. Not so very old, either, in spite of his sixty years, being hale and hearty, with sufficient pluck and energy for half a dozen men, and having good spirits enough and as much true Irish blood in his veins as is calculated to keep him young for full ten years to come—to say nothing of the incessant turnmoils in which he finds himself perpetually immersed through the machinations of his only daughter, the reigning tyrant, Miss Theo Blake.

Miss Blake is extremely lovely, though by no means showy, being neither very tall nor very much under-sized, but rather a happy medium between the two, and having a figure that the Venus de Medicis herself might well have been proud of. She has large, dark, deep grey eyes—peculiarly handsome—which have a habit of becoming suddenly black as night when their owner is excited or pained in any way, or happens to be in the act of asserting her rights—a privilege very frequently claimed by Miss Blake—and is also possessed of magnificent fair brown hair, fine and silky, which she always wears in a fashion of her own, and never changes. But the chief peculiarity about her face is its utter want of colour, not the faintest tinge of pink shining through the fair clearness of her skin. This, in some girls, would probably mar the effect of whatever beauty they might boast, making them at times appear even ugly, but in Miss Blake it is her principal charm.

Besides her loveliness, Theo has particularly fascinating

manners, a curious mixture of childishness and wisdom, self-possession and extreme shyness—a combination which in her case is generally acknowledged to be most infinitely bewitching; she has also a rather coquettish manner of raising her eyes to those of any of her admirers with an expression in them, half pleading and half frightened, that does considerable execution in more ways than one, taking the poor victims' hearts by storm, and otherwise committing fearful havoc in the most innocent manner possible. In fact, there is little use in denying or concealing any longer that Theo is a confirmed flirt, not so much perhaps from practice as from nature.

She is also rather passionate and perverse, with the strongest inclination in the world to gain her own point, and has coaxed and tormented and frightened everybody from her birth upwards into granting her that point, until she has at length become both the terror and admiration of every soul in the establishment, from Sir John himself down to the lowest stable-boy.

Her father and she being in the full enjoyment of precisely the same temperament, it naturally will occur now and then that they have slight differences of opinion on various subjects; but in all of these it is usually Theo's share to come off victorious, as the following little scene will prove.

The dining-room at Vesey is very handsome and ancient, and well lit both with lamps and the light of the glowing wood fire, near which, on one side, sits Sir John in a huge arm-chair, while Miss Blake reclines cosily in another directly opposite—her thoughts apparently busily employed as she stares with earnest eyes into the blazing wood.

At this moment the door opens, and George, Miss Blake's own groom, says, in a hesitating voice, and with rather a nervous manner—

'Please, Sir John, may I go home this evening and stay to-morrow?'

'Certainly not!' thunders Sir John. 'How do you suppose my horses are to be seen to, sir, while you are enjoying yourself all over the country? I did not employ you to spend your time at home, did I? This is at least the sixth time within three months that you have asked for a day, and——'

'No, only three,' interposes Miss Blake; 'and I really think, papa, that you ought to allow——'

‘ Now, Theo,’ interrupts her father, ‘ once for all I forbid you to interfere with me and my servants. I won’t have it ! George may go home if he wishes ; but, if he does, he may stay there.’

‘ No, he may not ! ’ says Theo, angrily. ‘ He takes care of “ Queen ” perfectly, and he is my groom, as you know ; and I think I might be allowed some voice in the matter.’

‘ Not when your voice causes the most utter want of discipline in my yard ! ’

‘ Well, really, papa, I wonder how you can be so savage,’ breaks in Theo, vehemently ; ‘ and his poor mother dying, too.’

‘ What ? ’ says Sir John, wheeling round. ‘ Is this true ? ’

‘ Well, Sir John, she is not at all so well as we could wish,’ George replies.

‘ Then why the deuce, sir, did you not say so at once, and not stand there like a fool ? ’ says his irascible master. ‘ Of course you can go ! ’

‘ Thank you, Sir John,’ says George, casting a grateful look at Theo over his master’s head, and disappears, while Sir John turns again to the fire, his handsome old face very nearly as red as the blazing embers before him. Presently Theo says, in a meek, lady-like voice—

‘ Are you forgetting my claret, papa dear ? ’

‘ Theo,’ answers her father, ‘ you are an extremely wilful, undutiful child, and I think it might perhaps warn you and do you good if I dismissed George to-morrow ; but I believe the best plan will be to——’ His eloquence and his ‘ best plan ’ are here alike nipped in the bud, as Theo, springing with quick warm impulsiveness from her seat, goes over to his side, and, kneeling down, places two little tender arms around his neck, and raising a beautiful half penitent, half laughing face to his, says softly—

‘ No, I won’t listen to your “ best plan,” and I am not undutiful ; how can you speak so unkindly to me, your own Theo ? ’

It would have been an iron heart indeed that could have resisted Theo Blake just then, with her pretty childish pleading, strengthened as it was by the earnest glances of the great grey eyes raised so lovingly to her father’s. Sir John at all events is not proof against the double fire, and forgives her, as he has forgiven her hundreds of times before, and as he will probably forgive her again before the night is ended—even so far forgetting her unfilial conduct as to call her

fondly, while he kisses her, 'his own beautiful girl.' So, peace being once more restored, Theo draws her chair closer to his, and sits with her hand close clasped in Sir John's, while they discuss their claret and the neighbourhood together, conversing indiscriminately about the horses and dogs, Lady Harford's ball and Tim Brierly's cottage, the Savilles, the coming hunt, and—Claude Ruthyn.

When the conversation comes to this latter point, Sir John becomes suddenly rather *distract* and nervous, and looks as though he wanted particularly to say something, but does not know how to begin it. The fact is, he has had this morning a proposal for Theo's hand from this identical Claude Ruthyn, and is more than commonly anxious to know what answer Theo is likely to give.

This last suitor of Miss Blake's is a clever, agreeable, and handsome young barrister, possessed of a large private income of his own, besides the fortune he is rapidly obtaining at the Bar, who, having come down on a visit to his uncle, Mr. Saville, about three months before this story opens, had there met Miss Blake; and, that young lady having gone in for a very decided flirtation with him, the consequences were what might have been expected—the popular young lawyer falling head over ears in love with her, and coming to the settled conclusion that the world, without her for his wife, would be a very dull place indeed.

Matters having arrived at this crisis, he soon made up his mind; and, coming down suddenly to Vesey that morning, took the old Baronet unawares, stating his intentions and his deep unchanging love for Theo, and begging Sir John, if possible, to try to gain Theo's consent to the engagement.

The old man, who, though shrinking with horror from the day when he must cease to be all in all to his idol, was too good a father to be blind to the advantages of this offer, and seeing the man's thorough and sincere love for his beautiful daughter, promised to do all in his power to forward the union, strictly on the condition, however, that he and Theo should not be separated by her marriage. London, he argued, was but one hour's journey by rail from Vesey Court, and Ruthyn could well manage that every day: so, Claude having fully complied with his wishes on this point, Sir John waits anxiously now a turn in the conversation that may serve his purpose, which the mention of Claude Ruthyn's name at last gives him.

'Theo, my dear,' says Sir John, 'who do you suppose was here to-day?'

'George Pierrepont,' says Theo, promptly.

'No,' answers her father; 'try again, my dear.'

'Captain Gesler?' Miss Blake asks, less positively this time.

'No,' replies Sir John again; 'wrong a second time. I suppose, as you cannot guess, I may as well tell you—Mr. Ruthyn.'

'Really!' exclaims Theo. 'Dear me, is he staying so soon again at the Rectory? Oh, what a pity I was not in to see him—was it not?'

'Yes,' returns her father, delightedly; 'you like him, my darling?'

'Like him? I should rather think I do—immensely. That is, you know, far better than any of the other men I know. He is so agreeable and clever, and says such nice little things to one.'

'Well,' puts in her father, warmly, 'he certainly has one of the warmest, truest hearts a man was ever blessed with.' And, Miss Blake making no reply to this, they both sit contemplating the fire and building imaginary castles in it for some little time. Presently Theo turns suddenly round, and, taking Sir John's face between both her hands, says suspiciously—

'You have something on your mind, papa—you know you have—some deep mysterious secret, and you are actually afraid to tell it to me.'

'Now, my dear Theo,' exclaims Sir John in a deprecating manner, but with conscious guilt upon his countenance, 'what could I have upon my mind that I should be afraid to tell you?'

'Do not attempt to equivocate or contradict me; you know as well as I do that there lies upon your conscience a grievous burden, which you are dying to share with somebody; and you know also that it has everything to do with Claude Ruthyn's visit here to-day.'

'Well,' answers Sir John, with sudden emotion, taking her hands from his face and holding them closely between his own, 'supposing I do know the secret of his visit here to-day, and supposing that visit to have a great deal to do with the future happiness of my darling girl—surely I may be excused for feeling a deep anxiety and interest in the matter?'

‘What did he say?’ the girl asks, flushing a little, and turning away her face from her father’s gaze.

‘He said he wanted my little girl to be his own for ever; and, seeing as I did the extreme love he bears for my child, I told him that from you alone could come the answer to his question, but that, succeeding with you, he had my full consent. Not but that,’ continues Sir John, in a low tone, ‘I felt very loth to say the word that must cause a separation between us two.’

‘Darling, never!’ cries Miss Blake, impulsively flinging her arms around his neck. ‘Claude Ruthyn shall never separate you and me.’

Sir John interrupts her gently by taking her in his arms, and placing her on his knee in the old familiar position of childhood, and then he says—

‘Theo, there you are wrong; there you undervalue Ruthyn’s nature. So far from wishing to separate you and me, he actually acceded to my request that your home should still be here. Few men, I believe, would so willingly have agreed to what must, in a measure, be a very inconvenient arrangement, but he seemed to have no thought for himself, thinking only of your happiness.’

After this a long time elapses before either of them breaks the silence, and Theo still sits upon her father’s knee, her arm around his neck, and her pretty cheek pressed close to his, until at length Sir John says gravely—

‘Well, Theo, when he comes to-morrow, what will you say to him?’

‘I shall say “Yes,” papa,’ Miss Blake answers quietly; ‘and for the future he shall be next to you in my heart. I will explain this to him, and of course he will at once see the justice of it.’

‘Oh, Theo, my dear love,’ says poor Sir John, regretfully, ‘that would not be at all right—in fact, it would be very wrong. Your husband should be the foremost in your thoughts; and, believe me, I shall very soon be contented with the second place.’

‘That you never shall,’ declares Miss Blake with calm decision; ‘you shall be first with me always.’ Whereupon she smooths his hair tenderly with both her hands, and, having kissed and petted him to her heart’s content, finally betakes herself to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER II.

'To-morrow' having, in the course of time, subsided into 'to-day,' Claude Ruthyn, with exemplary punctuality, and with his heart in his mouth, arrives at Vesey Court. On entering the grand old hall he is suddenly accosted by Sir John, who has been evidently on the look-out, and who, being in the highest state of excitement, claps him on the back, whispering most mysteriously, 'It is all right—she is in her boudoir;' upon which, taking all these signs into consideration—the young barrister begins to feel somewhat reassured, and, following the kindly hint, goes straightway up the oak staircase, and pauses at the door of Theo's *sanctum*.

Theo is seated in a very picturesque attitude, on a low chair before the fire, when Claude Ruthyn opens the door. She rises quickly—but gracefully—to welcome him, and over her face for an instant there creeps one of her rare faint blushes, that dies almost before its birth, as she holds out to him her little white hand, which he retains in his own firm clasp.

Ruthyn is well known in his profession—and indeed all the London world—as a very brilliant speaker and a rising man. Many a time has he been complimented on the extreme beauty and fluency of his language and his perfect self-possession; but, standing here to-day before the woman who holds his heart in her small hand, his powers of oratory seem to forsake him, and it is with considerable difficulty, and in a very low agitated tone, that he utters the simple words, 'Theo, I love you.'

'Yes,' shyly, 'I know it. Papa told me so.'

'My darling,' Claude says lovingly, and feeling bolder now that the first words have been delivered, 'you know also that I am come here to-day to ask you to be my wife, and to hear from your own lips whether you think it possible you can ever love me. Theo, you like me?'

'Yes,' she replies, still very shyly, and looking away from him into the fire, although her hand remains in his—'yes, I like you very much.' Claude's grasp tightens as she gives him this slight encouragement. 'But still you must listen

to me when I tell you that, however much I may like you, you can never be first in my thoughts.'

'Oh, Theo—my love—what are you saying?' cries Claude, a horrid fear overpowering him lest some one has forestalled him in the heart of his beloved, and gazing anxiously into her half-averted face.

'Oh no—not that,' Theo says, divining his thoughts in a moment. 'It is only papa I mean. I know you will understand at once that nobody ever can be as dear to me as he is.' Then with a charming little upward glance, half shy, half pleading, from the large grey eyes, she says, 'Do you mind—much?'

'Not a bit,' Claude answers, with a sigh of intense relief, 'as it is only your father. But you will try to love me too a little in time, will you not? And—you will marry me, Theo?'

'Yes,' Miss Blake replies, relapsing into her former shyness; whereupon the young man, stooping, kisses her, and so they are betrothed.

Theo stipulates for a year's grace, six months of which pass quietly and happily enough, when one morning, about the end of that time, both she and her father are startled by the receipt of a letter from Lady Mostyn—Theo's aunt—inviting her warmly to come up to her and spend the remaining months of her liberty in London.

'This will greatly please me, and do the child much good,' her ladyship writes, 'as it is essential that Theo should both know and be known in the London world before entering it as a married woman.'

This letter is the cause of great perplexity both to Sir John and Theo, the former wondering silently how he will be able to endure Vesey for so long a time without the presence of its ruling sovereign, and Theo herself being swayed by two conflicting desires—the one to stay with her father, the other to see a little of the London life she has heard so much about.

While they hesitate the entire day, even up to dinner-time, over the answer to be sent to Lady Mostyn's proposal, Claude Ruthyn most opportunely arrives; and, the matter being placed before him and duly discussed, he gives it as his opinion that Theo ought to go, feeling in his own mind how sweet it will be to have his darling so much nearer to him.

'You are a traitor in the camp,' says Sir John, 'and your

reasons are obvious; however, I dare say you are right; so go you shall, Theo.'

'What will you do without me?' Miss Blake asks plaintively, twining her pretty fingers within his. 'I shudder when I picture you here alone.'

'I dare say he is inwardly rejoicing at the delicious prospect before him,' Claude puts in provokingly.

'Very good,' returns Theo; 'but please to remember that this is all your doing; and, if I happen to fall in love with any one of the dukes or marquises that seem to be always running loose about London, and elope with him, you may blame yourself. Have you quite finished your wine? Are you sure? Well, then, come and smoke your cigar with me, on the terrace.'

Miss Blake holds out to her lover, with pretty childish grace, her slender hand. He takes what she offers him so sweetly, bending to kiss it as he does so, and they both pass out into the quiet Spring night, where Claude Ruthyn smokes the last cigar he will ever smoke with beautiful Theo Blake.

The matter being finally arranged, the next morning, after breakfast, Miss Blake mounts her favourite mare the 'Queen,' and gallops straight across country to bid a tender farewell to her chosen friend and *confidante*, Clarissa Saville.

This latter young lady is a first cousin of Claude Ruthyn's, and a niece of Mr. Saville's, and generally comes for about four months in the year from her own home in Todminster to the Rectory, to cheer and enliven her uncle and aunt, to whom her presence is as dew to the flowers. She is a pretty little girl, and both she and Theo entertain a most lively and romantic attachment for each other.

'Clarissa,' says Miss Blake, 'I have come over the whole way from Vesey, at railway speed, to tell you a piece of the most astounding intelligence. No, thank you, dear, I will not sit down, as I have only five minutes to stay. I am going to London next week for six months. There! Congratulate me.'

'You are not going to be married at once, are you?' Clarissa exclaims with uplifted eyebrows.

'No, no, not that, you small goose,' Theo says; 'but papa had a long letter yesterday from Lady Mostyn—my aunt, you know—inviting me to spend some time with her. And so I am going, and am come here to-day to bid you good-bye.'

‘ Oh, you lucky girl ! ’ Clarissa murmurs dolefully. ‘ How I wish I had an aunt Geraldine, or an aunt anything else for that matter, to invite me to London ! Of course she will take you to all the balls, and operas, and concerts, and—and—everything, and you will get lots of the prettiest dresses, you know, and all that. I declare, Theo, I feel horribly envious ! And Claude—is he very glad about it ? ’

‘ Yes,’ answers Miss Blake, ‘ very glad ; indeed, I dare say but for him I should not be going at all, as I was feeling very undecided about it, not liking to leave the *pater* alone, you see, knowing as I do how dreadfully he will miss me, poor darling, when Claude came and laughed away our hesitations and arranged it all. So I really am going in the end,’ she concludes, with a smile of intense enjoyment at the pleasant prospect opening before her.

‘ Well,’ Clarissa says, half shyly, and blushing a good deal, ‘ I have something wonderful to tell you also, Theo. I had such a dear long letter from Hastings this morning, telling me that he has got his promotion, and reminding me of my promise to go out to him ; so I shall join him in a few months, I suppose. Are you surprised ? ’

‘ Good gracious, Clarissa, why did you not tell me that before ? ’ cries Miss Blake. ‘ Why, next to your news, mine sinks into utter insignificance ! So you are really going out to Hastings at last ! Well, I am glad, for both your sakes ; but what on earth is to become of me, bereft of my chief bridesmaid ? ’

‘ Will you believe it, Theo—that was the very first thing I thought of when I had finished his letter for the fourth time ? “ I cannot be Theo’s bridesmaid,” I said in my own mind. And now that you are leaving so soon for London, I suppose I shall see very little more of you at all before I sail. However, you will promise me one thing, dearest, will you not ? ’ Miss Saville says, going over to Theo, and resting her hands lightly on her shoulders. ‘ You will promise, whatever happens, to come and spend my last day with me before I start for India.’

‘ I promise you most faithfully,’ Theo says, emphatically ; ‘ and not all the balls that can be given shall prevent my keeping my word. And, now that I have forgotten my first intention, and stayed half an hour instead of five minutes, I will go. So good-bye, darling ! ’

‘ Good-bye, Theo ! I do not know what I shall do with-

out you ; but I hope you will have a very, very happy time,' Clarissa whispers, her arms clasped warmly around her friend's neck, and her blue eyes full of tears. ' And, whatever occurs, do not forget me and your promise while you are away.'

They kiss once more, and—Miss Saville having made a final grand effort to strangle her companion—they part.

Theo rides home in wild, healthful, girlish spirits, born of the coming change in the somewhat monotonous routine of her daily life, putting her horse at every stiff fence that comes in her way, without fear or thought of danger ; while blue-eyed Clarissa Saville goes back once more to brood over the letter that is to her so sweet a treasure, and never dreams or guesses how much Theo's careless promise is fated to influence her after happiness.

The following week Sir John takes his daughter to London, and introduces her to her mother's sister, Lady Mostyn. Her ladyship is a widow, tall, stately, and handsome, but with an unmistakable look of good nature on her otherwise haughty face, and, on seeing Theo, takes an immediate fancy to her.

' Come here, child,' she says, drawing her to a window, and proceeding to examine her critically ; ' I want to look at you. Dear me, I should never have known you—you are so completely altered from the little shy girl of thirteen I so well remember. In fact, it never once occurred to me that you could by any possibility be grown up, until I received John's letter, telling me of your approaching marriage : that opened my eyes at once, I assure you. Well, well,' with a sigh, ' you are very like your poor mother.

' Am I ? ' Theo asks, with visible interest.

' Very—the same eyes, and the same voice too. I am saying, John,' continues her ladyship, turning towards her brother-in-law—' I am saying what a wonderful likeness there is between Theo and our poor Edith.'

' Wonderful, indeed,' Sir John answers sadly ; ' scarcely any difference that I can see, except perhaps in the want of colour.'

' Ah, true,' says her aunt, again regarding Theo attentively ; ' Edith had always such a very brilliant complexion ; though really now, I hardly know if it would be an improvement to Theo. I rather think the want of it gives the child a certain original and distinguished air, especially as painting

is so much in fashion. Well, now that you have come out of your hermitage, John, I hope you are going to spend a week with me at the very least.'

'Thank you, thank you, my dear Geraldine,' Sir John says hastily, 'but that is a thing I could never manage. If I were to remain away from home for a whole week, everything would go to rack and ruin, and——'

'Rack and fiddlesticks!' interposes Lady Mostyn, bluntly. 'You know as well as I do that nothing would go wrong at Vesey if you stayed away a twelvemonth, to say nothing of a week. Theo, try to persuade your father.'

Miss Blake crosses the room, and puts her arm within his.

'Do stay, papa,' she says, coaxingly; 'the change will do you good.'

'Now, Theo, you know well there is nothing on earth I should like better,' replies Sir John, indulging in a virtuous fib; 'but indeed it is impossible. However, I promise to come up very often to see you both, and that will answer quite as well;' and Theo, seeing his dislike to the proposition, abstains from further entreaty. 'Still, I must trespass on your hospitality for this one night, Geraldine, if you will allow me,' adds Sir John, addressing Lady Mostyn.

'My dear John, do not talk of trespassing on me,' rejoins Lady Mostyn, heartily. 'You know well that it is always a great treat to me to catch a glimpse of you, so seldom is it that I have that pleasure.'

'Well, is not that your own fault?' asks Sir John—'considering that Vesey is but one hour's journey from town, and that there is a welcome for you at the Court any month of the twelve?'

'Very true, John,' her ladyship answers, plaintively. 'I really must make up my mind to go down and see the old place some day. After our dear Theo's marriage I will certainly think about it. By-the-by, talking of marriages, do you recollect Lord Karn? The Honourable George he was when you knew him.'

'To be sure I do,' says Sir John.

'He is not very young, is he?'

'Young? Let me see—he was exactly ten years older than I when we were at Eton together,' replies Sir John; 'and I am sixty now, or thereabouts.'

'Very good; that makes him seventy,' her ladyship says triumphantly. 'Well, it is not three weeks ago since he

married a mere child—hardly as old as Theo there, I should say—and—’

‘Dinner is served, my lady,’ announces the footman, opening the door at this moment.

‘Good gracious! What on earth did she marry him for?’ exclaims Sir John, with intense disgust.

‘Money, my dear—money,’ Lady Mostyn replies with a little sigh of fashionable grief at the wickedness of the world in general, as she takes her brother-in-law’s arm and goes down to dinner.

The evening passes away very pleasantly—far more pleasantly than Sir John could have deemed possible out of Vesey Court—and the dainty little Swiss clock chimes twelve before any one of the three shows the slightest symptom of fatigue. Theo retires to rest very much pleased with this her first evening in town, feeling, with a sense of relief, that she has taken a wonderful fancy to her aunt, Lady Mostyn—which is not to be wondered at, as underneath all the seeming worldliness of that lady’s character there lies hidden a large amount of kindness and general amiability, which only requires an object like Theo on which to expend itself; and Lady Mostyn feels her heart open and soften as she gazes on the beautiful face of her poor dead sister’s child; so that between these two there springs up this first night of their acquaintance an affection which never dies.

The morning comes, bringing with it the hour of Sir John’s departure to his beloved home, and Theo is standing in the drawing-room with her arms around his neck, giving her final instructions and messages.

‘Well, good-bye, and God bless you, my dear,’ says Sir John, at length, ‘and be sure you take care of yourself.’

‘Oh, there is little fear of me,’ replies Miss Blake, valiantly; ‘but how you are to exist without your evil genius, I cannot imagine.’

‘Never mind me at all, my dear,’ answers her father; ‘put my loneliness out of your head altogether. There is no fear but that I shall get on capitally. Be sure you write to me very often, Theo, and tell me of all your fun and your conquests, as of course I shall be anxious to know how my girl is enjoying herself. And I will come up every week to see you.’

‘If you ever forget that, I shall never forgive you,’ says Theo.

‘I won’t forget it,’ answers her father. ‘Don’t you think I shall be dying to know whether this horrid London smoke is

disagreeing with my pet? Heaven willing, I shall be with you this day week; so kiss me once more now, my own love, and let me be off, or I shall certainly miss the train.'

'Good-bye, my dear darling, and do take care of yourself,' says Miss Blake, with a last tender embrace, and with her grey eyes full of tears—seeing which, Sir John takes himself hurriedly away, leaving behind him, with his beautiful daughter, his blessing and his cheque-book,

After this ensues a round of gaiety and amusement, fairly dazzling to a girl of Theo's age, who has been used to no greater variety in her life than that which a quiet county affords—consisting principally of periodical tennis parties of the flattest description, or perhaps an occasional ball; and Theo is fêted, and kettle-drummed, and admired to her heart's content.

There had been a large garden party at Lady Hancourt's and at it Theo had created quite a sensation, numerous strangers having requested introductions to the little pale, aristocratic child, who carried her small head so proudly amongst England's most celebrated beauties, much to Lady Mostyn's satisfaction, who lives her own life again in the triumphs of her beautiful niece. In truth, she bids fair to hold her own triumphantly, and reign queen of hearts over the male portion of London as over Vesey Court, counting already amongst her sworn admirers one marquis, one colonel, two baronets, and a young Life Guardsman, the Honourable Charlie Christian by name, who is her most abject slave.

Of course from her infancy Miss Blake has been accustomed to admiration of one sort or another, but then the men coming to Vesey Court had been few and far between, and even of those few some were too old and some too stupid for love-making; so that it is little wonder that the wholesale adulation she is now receiving should be very sweet to her. Still, for all the petting and flattery she is enjoying, she manages to keep her pretty head firmly fixed upon her shoulders, refusing to let it be even slightly turned by the many votive offerings and charming speeches which her admirers lay daily at her feet, and manages also to retain through everything the bewitching childishness of manner which has always been one of her greatest charms. And Claude Ruthyn, seeing this, and knowing that her heart is quite untouched by the universal homage that surrounds her, is well content that his darling should be caressed and sought after and made much of.

CHAPTER III.

It is Tuesday morning, and Lady Mostyn and her niece sit sipping their chocolate in the latter's morning-room, while they discuss leisurely the coroneted card that lies on the small table between them.

'It will be the best ball you have been at yet,' Lady Mostyn is saying: 'the Duchess is always so select.'

'She is agreeable too—very,' says Miss Blake. 'Will it be a large ball, do you think?'

'No—small,' her ladyship answers; 'she never over-crowds her rooms—which is such a comfort. I must have you look your best, Theo; so let us decide at once what you shall wear.'

'White satin, I think,' says Theo eagerly. 'I have never had a white satin, aunt Geraldine, and I should like one so very much.'

'But would it be becoming?' her aunt asks anxiously.

'I am certain it would,' rejoins her niece, placing her elbows on the table, and resting her small chin upon her hands. 'You remember I wore white silk at Mrs. Marston's—which is pretty much the same thing, only not so handsome—and you said I looked very well indeed.'

'Then that is settled,' decides her ladyship, with a sigh of relief; 'and we will choose a good salmon white, which is always becoming. But about ornaments. Theo?'

'I shall wear mamma's pearls—I like pearls and satin—and my arrow in my hair,' Miss Blake says slowly.

'Eh?' says her ladyship, discontentedly. 'You see, the arrow is all very well—though slightly heathenish, it is peculiar, and anything out of the common is sure to take; but I am afraid the gown, though pretty, will prove rather too much white for you, Theo. my pet—you know you are so very pale.'

'Am I?' says Theo, jumping up and surveying herself in the pier glass. 'What a pity it is that I was not born with a colour, like everybody else!'

'Then perhaps you would not have created as great a sensation as you have.'

'Now I won't be made conceited, aunt Geraldine, even by you,' interrupts Theo, playfully. 'You are worse than

Lord George; and he told me yesterday, in his delightfully horsey slang, that it was his own private opinion I could lick old Venus into fits. I am always dying to ask that man where he was educated, but I suppose it would be rude. Now tell me whom we may expect to meet at the Duchess of Santry's.'

'Well, now, let me see,' her ladyship says, sinking back in her chair, and beginning to look thoughtful: 'oh, of course I cannot exactly mention the precise names of those who will be there, but if you will just select three hundred of the best people out of all those you have met since you came to London, you will have made a very accurate guess. I fancy; and besides, young Christian told me yesterday that Loys Berresford has come home, and he, being a cousin of the Duchess's, will certainly be there.'

'Loys Berresford,' Theo repeats, looking puzzled—'I do not remember to have heard about him before. Loys—what a curiously pretty name! Who is he, aunt Geraldine?'

'Ah, true: I quite forgot you never knew him,' her aunt answers. 'Well, my dear, he is Lord Berresford, and he has just arrived from Vienna, where he has been for the last three years.' Here her ladyship pauses for a moment or so, and then continues—'Poor Loys, I remember so well what a sweet, handsome lad he was when first I knew him about six years ago. Yes, it must be just about that, I fancy, as he is at least twenty-six by this time.'

'Why do you call him "poor Loys"?' Miss Blake inquires, with pardonable curiosity. 'Did anything ever happen to him?'

'No, nothing exactly happened to him,' her aunt replies, 'except that he was so shockingly wild. You see he had always more money than is quite good for a young man entering life with nothing to do, and he unfortunately got amongst a bad set—a horribly fast set of men, who did their very best to ruin him.'

'And where were his father and mother all this time?' Theo asks, raising great pitying eyes to her aunt's face.

'Well, that was, I suppose, the primary cause of the whole unfortunate business. Lady Mostyn returns, half sadly. They both died when he was only a mere boy, leaving him to the care of guardians, who were too strict, and kept him in far more closely than was at all judicious with a lad of his temperament—at least so I have heard, and that was the story that went abroad, and so indeed the

Duchess herself told me—(he is a cousin, you know, and a wonderful favourite of hers)—and the consequences were, of course, what might have been expected. When, at twenty-one, he came in for his property, and felt himself his own master, he went straight to the bad.'

'Oh, what a sad, sad story!' says Miss Blake, feeling, she scarcely knows why, a strange, unaccountable interest in the fate of this luckless young lord. 'And after he went to the bad, aunt Geraldine, what became of him then?'

'When I say he went to the "bad," I mean that he became very reckless and wild and dissipated,' her ladyship replies; 'and bad stories began to be circulated about him. Not that he did anything dishonourable, poor boy! But society will talk; and presently two or three people in his own rank cut him. One would fancy, from the carelessness of his demeanour, that this slight would weigh very lightly on his heart; but, on the contrary, he was bitterly indignant—in fact, quite savage—and took to cutting all the rest of his acquaintances, without rhyme or reason. "It is my last act of friendship," he said to his cousin, with a reckless laugh. "I am saving them the annoyance of having to be the first to do the shabby deed." He went abroad soon afterwards, travelling from one place to another, we were given to understand, and never returned until now.'

'Poor fellow,' says the girl, with deep compassion both in look and tone; 'do you know his story reminds me of nobody so much as that unhappy Ishmael?'

'Yes, it really did look as if everybody's hand was against him,' her ladyship acquiesces slowly; 'and he was always himself only too ready to accept any challenge. He actually tried to cut me one day in the Park, but I would not allow him, and sent the footman after him to say that I requested he would come to me for five minutes. He came—reluctantly I must confess; and you should have seen him. He quite flushed all over his handsome face, poor boy, as he said, bitterly, "What, Lady Mostyn, have you really the moral courage to so far compromise yourself in the eyes of the world as to be seen speaking with me?" I cannot tell you, Theo, how sorry I felt for him at that moment.'

'And what did you say, aunt Geraldine?' her niece asks, eagerly, leaning her arms upon the table, and gazing with earnest expectation at her relative. 'Do tell me what you said.'

‘ Oh, with regard to me,’ aunt Geraldine answers carelessly, ‘ I just put out my hand to him, you know, and said quietly, “ My dear Loÿs, you must have greatly underestimated my affection for you if you imagine that the eyes of the world could ever induce me to look upon you in any other light than that of an old friend.” He said nothing in reply beyond a simple “ Thank you,” but I know he was grateful for my sympathy, and I could have sworn there were tears in his beautiful blue eyes as he turned away. He was as dear a young fellow—in spite of all that people said against him—as one could wish to know ; and they could never turn me against him,’ concludes her ladyship, warmly, with a little defiant shake of her head—‘ never, if they talked until Doomsday.’

‘ I wonder what has brought him home now ? ’ Miss Blake inquires, thoughtfully.

‘ His uncle, Lord Allport, died the other day, and left him all his property—at least so Charlie was telling me ; and that I suppose is one reason, though I really believe myself he was glad of the excuse to come back again and see his old friends.’

‘ I do hope he will be at the Duchess of Santry’s ball this day week,’ Miss Blake says, earnestly. ‘ I should so very much like to see him after all you have told me.’

‘ I shall be really anxious to see him myself,’ Lady Mostyn replies, rising as she speaks ; ‘ but I dare say he will have changed beyond my recollection. There, we have talked ourselves into relaxed sore throats, I should think, by this time ; so run away, darling, and put on your things while I order the carriage ; and we will have an hour or two in the Park before dinner.’

CHAPTER IV

THE Duchess of Santry’s rooms to-night are as exquisitely beautiful as Nature and Art combined can make them. There are flowers here and flowers there, and, in fact, flowers wherever the eye may chance to fall, with white unveiled statues gleaming through dusky leaves and trailing ever-

greens and floating ferns, and the distant murmur of wild sweet music mingling with the sweeter fragrance of the air.

In the richly-filled conservatories the faint lamps shed but a 'dim religious light' over the magnificent display of rare exotics that rise from floor to ceiling, scarcely lighting up the distant corners, which every now and then receive into their dark embrace a passing shadow. In the ball-room itself the scene is more brilliant still, where jewels and rich dresses and bewitching faces flash brightness as they move.

Leaning against a wall, rather apart from the dancers, with his handsome head well thrown back and a moody frown upon his brow, stands Loÿs, Lord Berresford. A more really perfect face than his it would be impossible to imagine, though now it wears a look of the most intense *ennui* that somewhat mars the classical beauty of the features. His arms are partially folded, one hand restlessly stroking his heavy brown moustache; and in the whole attitude and bearing of the man discontent is visibly written, while he never stirs, or seems to take the slightest notice of all the pretty covert smiles and bright coquettish glances which every now and then are wasted upon him.

His cousin the Duchess, whose special favourite he is, and who obstinately through all maintains her loving creed that 'Dear Loÿs was ever more sinned against than sinning,' watches him furtively and rather anxiously from a distance, where she is endeavouring to hold converse with a stone deaf and rather scandalous old dowager, and wishes inwardly he would ask her for an introduction to some of the really charming girls who are adorning her rooms, and who have come out since last he was in London.

She wishes also, greatly, that he would not stand there alone, with such a proudly isolated look upon his face, on this his first presentation to the home world since his return, and has half made up her mind to cross the room and actually beg of Loÿs to allow her to procure a partner for him—that handsome Lady Olive, for instance—when, looking at him for about the twentieth time, she suddenly sees the moody frown disappear altogether from his brow, and an expression of the most intense admiration take its place.

She glances round eagerly for the cause, and perceives Lady Mostyn, with beautiful, childish Theo Blake beside her, advancing slowly through the throng of dancers to her side, and, continuing to look, thinks that Miss Blake, with her

white satin and pearls. and innocent, colourless face. makes as sweet a picture to-night as a girl can make, as, with her usual careless, high-bred air, she walks up that long room amidst a blaze of light.

Presently, after the hostess has greeted her new friends, and Theo is standing at a little distance, surrounded by a group of men, all with cards in their hands, and all eager to claim her as a partner, the Duchess turns with a start to answer Lord Berresford, who has come over and is speaking very earnestly to her.

‘Who is that beautiful girl? he asks. ‘What a lovely simple expression! Introduce me to her. Constance, will you?’

‘Of course I will,’ the Duchess says anxiously, only half glad at this unexpected interest on his part: ‘but you must not lose your heart to her. Loÿs, as she is forbidden fruit.’

‘Is she?’ Loÿs says, with a strange little pang of envy gnawing at his heart, and, biting his underlip savagely, adds, ‘I might have known it: so charming a child would scarcely be let go free. Is the man in the room?’

‘No, he could not come.’

‘Then introduce me at once,’ his lordship says, moving, as he speaks, towards the spot where Theo is standing, looking pleased and happy, and thoroughly in her element.

‘May I hope for a dance with you this evening, Miss Blake?’ Loÿs asks eagerly, when his cousin has walked away, having performed the ceremony of introduction. ‘Your card is not quite full, is it?’

‘No,’ glancing at the diminutive gilded programme lying in her hand. ‘From four to ten I am engaged: but this is the third they are beginning now—is it not?—and nobody has asked me for it—unless you are going to do so,’ she adds, with a pretty smile and a charming upward glance from her grey eyes.

‘The Fates are appeased!’ the young man exclaims, gaily, offering her his arm. ‘I had almost ceased attempting to propitiate Fortune: but I begin to think now that she is tired of abusing me. Besides this waltz—if I promise to dance my very best—you will give me the eleventh, will you not?—and perhaps the twelfth?’

‘I will tell you that when I have had a trial of your “very best,”’ Miss Blake answers, laughingly; and then they join the other dancers.

When, presently, they stop, slightly out of breath, Lord Berresford says

‘Well, am I to have those other two dances?’

‘Yes,’ Theo answers, without the faintest hesitation. ‘You shall have them, and with pleasure.’ Then, with a sigh of intense enjoyment, she remarks, ‘Oh, what a delicious amusement this dancing is! I do think it is the most charming thing in all the world – don’t you?’

‘No, I do not,’ Loys answers promptly. ‘I know several things which I consider far more charming.’

‘Do you?’ with a look of surprise, born of the late wild, sweet enjoyment she has experienced. ‘Tell me them.’

‘Shall I? Very well, then. Come with me into this receptacle for insects, and I will impart my private thoughts to you amongst the flowers,’ Lord Berresford says, leading her towards one of the dimly lit conservatories.

When they have reached the farthest end, and Theo has comfortably ensconced herself amongst the soft cushions of a sofa, she says, carelessly

‘Now, then, tell me the things you most particularly affect.’

‘The things that to me appear the most charming, you mean,’ Loys answers slowly, throwing one arm across the back of the sofa, and gazing intently at her. ‘Well, then, I must at once acknowledge that large deep grey eyes and soft brown hair seem to me the most beautiful things in all the world.’

‘Then your knowledge of beautiful things must be limited,’ Miss Blake answers quietly, indolently, plucking an unoffending little rose to pieces as it lies half hidden in her bouquet. ‘Now to me they do not; so here is one point already on which we totally disagree.’

‘Rather soon for us to be disagreeing, is it not,’ he asks with a smile, ‘considering that it is scarcely half an hour since I had the pleasure of being introduced to you? Well, this decides me. I shall tell you no more of my favourite ideas, for fear we might come to open war; and, to change the subject, I will ask you to give me one of those unfortunate flowers you seem so industriously bent upon destroying – will you?’

‘No!’ petulantly, raising the flowers and gazing critically at them. ‘I would not spoil the symmetry of my bouquet for any one. How can you be so selfish as to ask me when

you see so many others around you only waiting to be plucked ?

‘ Yes, I see, with a disappointed look. ‘ Thanks for the suggestion ; but I hardly think I shall go to the trouble of procuring myself a flower in that way. It was just a simple fancy of mine to get one from your hand ; and I was foolish enough for the moment to imagine you would not refuse me. But you are quite right—I do not suppose I am worth so sweet a gift.’

‘ I did not say you were worthless, did I ? ’ she says, bending over the flowers in question, and feeling half sorry that she has refused him. ‘ I should be sorry to think that of you, or any one. Nobody can be thoroughly worthless, you know, until they have no good left in them.’

‘ Well, I rather think that comes very near my case,’ he answers, with a light laugh. ‘ It seems a long time since I have had anything to do with good people, or they with me.’

‘ Do you not like them ? ’ gravely.

‘ It is not so much that I dislike *them* as that they don’t appreciate *me*,’ Loïs answers ; ‘ only a very slight difference, after all, is it not ? ’ There, do not look so grieved about my sins, Miss Blake, or I shall begin to feel horrified about them myself for the first time ; and that is scarcely worth while, is it ? ’

‘ Do not talk like that,’ Theo exclaims, impatiently. ‘ It is not right, and I do not care to hear you. You seem to take quite a pleasure in not being what is called good.’

‘ There you wrong me,’ the young man answers, hastily. ‘ Heaven knows I wish to be as holy as the best of these pious Pharisees who make such a point of passing me by on the other side. But that is one of the impossible things, I fear ; so I must only submit to be found wanting.’

‘ If not good, what are you then ? ’ Miss Blake inquires, raising her eyes to his, and thinking of that conversation last week which she had with aunt Geraldine over her chocolate.

‘ The other thing, I am afraid,’ he replies, feeling half amused at the turn the discussion has taken, but returning her gaze steadily.

‘ Bad ? ’ Theo asks, in a low tone ; and, with a slight air of defiance, he bows his head in token of assent, though, with all his bravery, he cannot entirely suppress the shade of sadness and vain regret that creeps over and darkens his face, as he thinks how much better it would have been could he, with

conservatory ! And yet I suppose her heart is entirely bound up in the man she is going to marry. It is a hard thing that, of all the women I have ever met, most of whom were only too ready to smile upon me—though why, goodness only knows—the only woman whose love I should have valued is denied me. I wonder what sort the fellow is on whom she is going to bestow her priceless self ? He ought to be a prince at the very least, if she were to get her deserts ; though I dare say, after all, she is following the destiny of most handsome women, and is throwing herself away on some commonplace nonentity, totally incapable of appreciating such an inestimable gift. I wonder if she is very much in love with him ? If I could be only sure that she was not, I would——’ But here his thoughts wander to forbidden ground, and with an effort he brings himself back to the present world, to find Theo’s gaze fixed full upon him from the opposite side of the room ; and, as their eyes meet, she smiles one of her rare sweet smiles, which he answers back again, and in another moment she is once more lost amongst the crowd.

He manages to take her down to supper, however, and lingers over her, attending to her wants, and anticipating her every wish, as though she were a mere child, to be petted and caressed—all which attentions fall with dangerous sweetness on Miss Blake’s heart. It is very gratifying to have that handsome, tired-looking face brightening into unmistakable pleasure at a word from her, while he remains so dead and cold to the charms of all the others around her ; and it is almost with a sigh of regret that she accepts his arm to go back again to the ball-room.

‘This next will be ours—the eleventh,’ Loys says, as they reach the door ; ‘it has seemed to me about a quarter of a century since that last waltz we had together.’

‘The eleventh, is it ?’ Theo asks, with open dismay. ‘And I heard aunt Geraldine tell somebody this very moment she is going home at once.’

‘Oh, you must not disappoint me in this dance,’ Lord Berresford says, with almost passionate entreaty in his tone ; ‘I have waited so long for it, too. Your aunt Geraldine is so old a friend of mine that I am certain I can persuade her to remain if you will give me permission to try—that is,’ bending and looking anxiously into his companion’s eyes, ‘if you really care to stay.’

‘Oh, I want to stay, of course,’ Miss Blake replies, hastily, with charming candour—showing clearly how disappointed she is at the prospect of losing this last dance—and blushing softly as she speaks; ‘so go at once and ask her. There she is, over there—do you not see her?—talking with, and I do believe saying good-night to, old Lord Hancourt. Go this minute, or it will be too late; and be sure you tell her it is very early. I shall wait here for you until you return.’

Thus admonished, Loÿs goes; and Miss Blake watches anxiously his tall slight figure as he makes his way with considerable difficulty through the revolving crowd to where Lady Mostyn is standing. Theo can see from her post of observation that he is asking something very entreatingly of her ladyship, but cannot guess the latter’s reply, Lord Berresford being in such a position as to prevent her watching the expression of her aunt’s face, so that it is with eager childish impetuosity she greets him as he once more approaches her side.

‘Well?’ she asks, quickly, looking expectantly at him.

‘Yes, it is well,’ he answers, triumphantly. ‘My unrivalled eloquence prevailed; see what it is to have the voice of the charmer, Miss Blake. My touching little speech melted her ladyship at once; and we are to have our last dance unmolested.’

And so they do have their last dance together, and are very perilously happy and contented in each other’s society, until Lady Mostyn’s fan descends with gentle force upon Theo’s shoulder, while its owner murmurs—

‘Come, Theo—it is really all hours. You are becoming terribly dissipated, child. Loÿs, bring her down at once to the cloak-room; I shall not stay a moment longer to please either of you.’

So Loÿs takes her downstairs as he is commanded, and covers up the soft round shoulders very tenderly, in a marvelously lovely opera cloak, finding it, with those divine eyes looking into his, the most difficult task he has ever undertaken to discover the fastening, and finally puts his beautiful partner carefully into her carriage.

‘Good-night, Loÿs,’ Lady Mostyn says, just as they move off, adding cordially—‘you will come and see us very soon, will you not?’

‘Thank you; indeed I will,’ Loÿs answers. ‘Good-night, Miss Blake!’ And he feels, as his grasp tightens, that he

would willingly sacrifice home, and lands, nay, life itself, to be able, for even a little time, to call the hand he holds his own.

‘He is very little changed,’ Lady Mostyn says, after a long silence; and when they are well on their way home—‘very little, indeed, except that he is slightly older looking. Now is he not handsome, Theo?’

‘Very,’ Miss Blake answers, absently, as they roll along swiftly under the silent stars, thinking considerably more than is good for her of this same handsome young lord, who has shown her so plainly to-night how hopelessly he has succumbed to the power of her fresh, fair loveliness, and wonders vaguely in her own mind when she shall see him again, and whether he is really so very wicked as people have said. He does not look wicked, she thinks. Those who inveighed most bitterly against him were probably mere outsiders, and knew nothing at all about him.

How pleased, how gratified he had seemed when she offered him that little flower to-night; had he yet thrown it away, faded and dead as it must be, or would he—— But here she breaks off this train of thought to enter upon another, and wonders, curiously, if he has ever been in love, and, if not—if not—well, in that case, she thinks the girl who in the end will gain his heart will be a very happy girl indeed; and just at this point there rises before her mind the face of Claude Ruthyn—the face of the man she has promised in less than four months from now to marry; and it is with a bitter pang of self-reproach that she remembers how little room he has occupied in her thoughts to-night.

The recollection of her faithlessness somewhat damps the almost feverish gaiety of her spirits, sending her to bed with a heavy weight upon her conscience, where she dreams all night of Loïs’s triumphant face, as he stands in a menacing attitude over her, a knife uplifted in his hand, while at her feet lies, pale and bloody, the corpse of Claude Ruthyn.

She awakes shivering from her ghastly dreams; and when, some hours later, her betrothed calls to see how his darling is looking after her last night’s fatigue, and on leaving bends to claim his farewell caress, try as she may, and does, she cannot entirely withstand the slight shrinking from his embrace which unaccountably overpowers her. Seeing his anxious, disappointed expression, however, she inwardly upbraids her own cruel conduct, calling herself by all sorts of unpleasant

names; and when, some few minutes later, after a little more lingering, he finally takes his leave, she atones for her seeming heartlessness by going to him and kissing him gently of her own sweet accord—the remembrance of which little tender act on her part he treasures in his heart, and lives on for many a day afterwards.

CHAPTER V.

‘Of course you are coming to Mrs. Marston’s garden-party to-morrow?’ Lord Berresford asks, about a month later, as he stands on the hearth-rug in Lady Mostyn’s drawing-room, watching Theo’s nimble fingers as they move swiftly to and fro amongst the coloured silks she is fashioning into some intricacy for a bazaar.

He has managed to see her pretty nearly every day since their first meeting at the Duchess of Santry’s, and hour by hour has the conviction grown more steadily upon him that he loves her madly and passionately, although he cannot but feel that in all probability his love must terminate in bitterness.

‘Of course you are coming to Mrs. Marston’s garden-party?’ he says.

‘Perhaps,’ Miss Blake answers, absently.

‘Oh, do not say “Perhaps”—say “Certainly.” It will be such an unpardonable breach of faith on your part if you decline at the last moment, because it was simply upon the understanding that you were going that I was induced to accept the invitation at all. You surely will not be so cruel as to deliver me up to the tender mercies of all those abominable old dowagers to-morrow?’

‘Did I say “Perhaps”?’ Miss Blake inquires, rousing herself from the contemplation of her work. ‘If I did, I could not have been listening to a single word you said, as I am most undoubtedly going, weather permitting.’ Then, after an almost imperceptible pause, she adds, ‘Mr. Ruthyn is to come here and escort Lady Mostyn and myself.’

‘Ruthyn?’ he asks, superciliously raising his eyebrows. ‘And who is Ruthyn?’ He knows perfectly in his heart who the man is of whom he is speaking. ‘I never recollect hearing the name before.’

‘He is a friend of mine. Miss Blake answers with cold emphasis.

A very particular friend?’

‘Yes, a very particular friend,’ she says, with rather more emphasis this time, bending her head to hide the crimson blood that rises, covering unmercifully both face and neck with its rich glow—marking which signs of confusion, Loys involuntarily clenches his teeth firmly upon his under-lip with a sudden quick pang of intense jealousy, and determines in his own mind to make her speak at all hazards of this hated engagement. So, coming over to the little inlaid table directly behind which she is sitting, he sits down composedly, and, resting his elbow on the edge of it, begins to stroke his moustache in a rather meditative manner. Presently he says—

‘What are you doing?’ And Miss Blake, inexpressibly relieved by the turn the conversation has taken, answers gaily—

‘I shall not tell you. You would only say most probably that I was a specimen of harmless lunacy. Men always imagine that any work which a woman engages in must of necessity be silly.’

‘Put me down as an exception. I highly approve of their having plenty of employment—silly or not silly—as a means of keeping them out of mischief; besides which, when women have pretty hands, it is only fair that they should be allowed some way of displaying them; and nothing, I think, answers that purpose so well as work—or rings. By-the-by, that is an extremely handsome ring upon your finger.’

‘This?’ Theo asks, rather consciously, pointing to a little gold band studded with turquoises and pearls—a ring she knows well he does not mean.

‘No, the opals and diamond, on the third finger of your left hand,’ he answers quietly, gazing at her with a settled purpose in his eyes the while.

‘Oh, this one,’ she says, endeavouring to speak in an unconcerned manner, but failing miserably, and twisting the jewelled article in question round and round upon her finger nervously. ‘Yes, it is a pretty thing. Then, raising her eyes to his, and seeing the expectant look upon his face, she adds, suddenly and defiantly, ‘It is my engagement ring.’

‘Indeed!’ Lord Berresford answers, throwing into his voice as large an amount of well-bred astonishment as he

well can. 'So you really are engaged? I should never have thought it. Well, in the matter of jewellery he has proved himself a fellow of extremely good taste, whoever he is—only I suppose he forgot that opals are unlucky.'

To this there is no reply, and for a little time 'silence reigns supreme,' except for the quick, impatient ticking of the little ormolu clock upon a distant table, which presently chimes faintly and sweetly the half-hour.

Loÿs still maintains his former attitude, never stirring or removing his moody gaze from off the girl who sits before him, striving calmly, but with trembling fingers, to mark out the pattern that lies upon her lap, while all the time her poor heart beats so strongly that she almost fancies he too must hear it.

'Miss Blake.' No answer.

'Miss Blake'—this time louder and more sternly—'why did you never before tell me of this engagement?'

'Because I did not see the necessity for doing so,' Miss Blake answers, meaning to be cold and haughty, but breaking down pitifully as she adds, 'and—and—besides, I thought you knew it.'

Loÿs did know it, from that very night, some weeks back, on which he first made her acquaintance; but, to suit his own purposes, he chooses now to smother this knowledge, and so, ignoring the latter part of her sentence, he gives heed solely to the former, and says, bitterly—

'Of course I know I have no right whatever to demand an explanation from you on that or any other subject; but putting aside altogether my right, did it never occur to your own heart—knowing yourself to be the property of another man, as you did—what cruel kindness it was to allow me to be in your society day after day and hour after hour, without one word of warning, until I had reached the topmost height of my Fool's Paradise, and then to cast me out into darkness—did this never enter into your consideration of things "right and fitting"?''

'You have no cause for talking to me like this,' the girl says, rising as she speaks, pale and very agitated, and letting needles, patterns, coloured silks, and all fall unheeded to the ground; 'you have no cause—none. What have I ever said or done that you should mount into the paradise of which you speak?'

'Nothing,' he answers passionately—'nothing beyond a

few sweet smiles and a few soft words and the exercise of the power of your fatal beauty. Even the man you have promised to marry could find no fault with any of your words to me ; and yet, for all that, you have won my heart as surely as though you had expended all your energies upon the task. Are you satisfied with your complete success now that it is attained ? ’

‘ Loÿs ! ’ With wild, dangerous, subtle sweetness his Christian name falls from her lips upon his ear, almost unconsciously on her part, for at this moment all is forgotten—her engagement, her plighted word, her pride—everything save the unhappiness of the man before her, whom she now feels she loves with all her soul, and as she can never hope to love Claude Ruthyn. As she speaks she lays upon his arm a little hand that trembles nervously—raises to his her great grey eyes, now indeed no longer grey, but black with all the pain and love and passionate entreaty that shine with such fatal clearness in their depths.

‘ Loÿs ! ’ The word in itself is a caress, but, accompanied as it is by the gentle imploring clasp upon his arm, it proves too much for Berresford, and flinging all prudence and honour to the winds, he catches between his own broad palms the little fragile hand, whispering in a low vehement tone—

‘ Theo, my love, my darling ! ’

At this point, however, there is heard in the adjoining drawing-room a rustle as of approaching gowns, mingled with the sound of voices and Lady Mostyn’s low, soft laugh ; and Theo has barely time to withdraw her hand—stooping to cover her confusion by gathering up the fallen silks still lying at her feet—when the door opens, and Lady Mostyn herself appears, ushering in Lord and Lady Hancourt.

Not one of these three new-comers could have guessed from Loÿs’s well-bred smile and Theo’s calm, self-possessed greeting, how passionately are throbbing both their hearts, or imagined the scene that had just been enacted ; and it also passed unnoticed when, some few minutes later, Loÿs rose to take his leave and bid good-bye, how strangely lingering was his farewell to Miss Blake, and how earnestly and persistently, though vainly, he strove to meet her gaze, and how silent and *distracte* the girl was for at least five minutes after he had gone.

CHAPTER VI.

THE next day dawns both clear and bright. The sun is shining tranquilly down upon Mrs. Marston's guests, as they stand grouped here and there on the soft sloping lawn beyond which runs the silver Thames.

All through the afternoon Theo has flirted to her heart's content, in her usual childish, *insouciant* manner, with the numerous men who throng to her standard, making herself remarkable with no one, but being most particular to avoid Lord Berresford whenever that is possible. So the day passes, until towards the close of it she finds herself the centre of a small group of both sexes standing on the water's brink.

'Oh, what lovely lilies!' cries Miss Blake, suddenly, pointing to a considerable distance where great sleepy-looking flowers lie, floating backwards and forwards lazily on the river's surface, 'Fancy my never having procured any of them during the entire day! I must get some at once. Who will take me over in this little boat? I know you do not row,' turning to Claude Ruthyn, who is standing near her.

He shakes his head acquiescingly, murmuring as he does so—

'Do not go at all, Theo. What signify those water-lilies? And I feel certain that that small punt is not quite safe. Believe me, it is better for you to remain here.'

'No, no,' she says, impatiently; 'I must get those lilies, as I have set my heart on them. I won't be disappointed. Sir Harry,' turning to a jovial, red-faced old gentleman of about sixty-five, 'will you row me across? I promise most faithfully not to flirt with you once the entire time—there!'

'My dear Miss Blake, you know how delighted I should be if I only could,' answers the rosy individual addressed; 'but it is at least twenty years since I touched an oar, and there would be much more probability of my upsetting the boat than of doing anything else; here, however, is the fellow who will answer your purpose. Berresford—Berresford!' calling to a tall figure coming slowly towards them. 'Hurry yourself, man, you are badly wanted here.'

'Oh, no!' Theo cries involuntarily, putting out her hand in a vain effort to stop him, thereby causing Ethel Marston to turn and gaze wonderingly at her. 'Oh, no, Sir Harry!'

But it is too late to make further remonstrance, as Loÿs is already beside her.

‘Want to be rowed across?’ he asks eagerly. ‘Then I am the very fellow, if you will trust yourself with me, Miss Blake. I here constitute myself your “jolly young water-man” on the spot, and promise to take superfluous care of you. Come along; and even if this exceedingly ancient article in the way of boats should overturn, I solemnly swear, before all these witnesses, that I will drown myself with you.’

‘Thank you,’ somewhat ruefully. ‘That would be wonderful consolation, certainly.’ Then, making one final effort to escape the *tête-à-tête* she sees impending, she turns to Ethel Marston, saying, hesitatingly, ‘But perhaps there is no time? It is getting very late, is it not? And aunt Geraldine——’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ Ethel returns. ‘There are two full hours before you. I hope nobody is dreaming of returning for ever so long a time. Make Lord Berresford take you round the little point—here, and show you the sanded path up the side of the hill—the one with the railing—there is such a charming view from the top. Do you hear, Lord Berresford?’

‘Ay, ay, my lady,’ answers his lordship, readily, who is in the punt, busily engaged in wiping down the seat with his handkerchief. ‘Now, Miss Blake!’ and he holds out his hand to assist her into the boat.

There is no help for it, and in another moment they are gliding swiftly over the water together, she very silent, and he laughing and talking gaily until they have turned the small point that hides them from view, when he too sinks into speechlessness.

So they move on in eloquent silence into the middle of a bed of gleaming lilies, a small number of which he gathers as they float through his fingers, and throws into Theo’s lap, while the frail boat glides of its own accord towards the usual landing-place at the foot of the small railed pathway mentioned by Ethel Marston. Here Loÿs, springing lightly on the shore, offers his hand to Miss Blake, and she too, rising, steps upon the bank, and together they ascend the little hill, neither of them speaking one word until they reach the summit, when they rest with their arms upon the rails, and watch the last streaks of the golden sun as he sheds his dying glory on the waters.

‘ Theo, do you remember what I said to you yesterday ? ’

‘ Yes.’ She is looking away from him down into the calm blue depths lying so far below her. ‘ I remember—I wish I could forget—and I want you to promise me here to-day never, either now or at any other time, to speak in such a manner to me again.’

‘ I shall never promise you that—never ! I love you, Theo—I tell you so plainly in words to-day, although you must have known it by my manner yesterday ; I love you as I never have and never will again love a woman ; and I believe, from my soul, that you love me too.’

‘ You surely forget to whom you are speaking ? ’ turning upon him beautiful, proud, grieved eyes. ‘ You must have forgotten that you are speaking to an engaged woman ? ’

‘ No, I forget nothing. I know that I am speaking to a woman who is going deliberately to marry a man she does not love.’

‘ What reason have you for saying that ? ’ the girl asks after a moment’s pause, during which she has realised how bitterly true all his last words have been, and feels also, with a sinking heart, what a difficult task it will be to conquer in this battle, which she knows she must fight alone.

‘ I know it,’ Loÿs answers—not triumphantly, but with the calm determined air of a man who feels perfectly convinced of the truth of what he is saying ; ‘ I know it as surely as though your own voice had said it. Do you think I could have been in your society for four weeks without discovering how different the story is that your eyes betray from that which your lips endeavour to tell ? No, Theo ; unconsciously as you have told it, I still know your whole story, and I am glad of it—I thank Heaven for it ! ’ adds the young man earnestly ; ‘ because, loving you as I do, I believe that in the end I shall win you, in spite of yourself. Theo, will you not speak to me ? ’

‘ You are a coward,’ exclaims Miss Blake with quiet scorn, but with an angry flash from her magnificent eyes—‘ a contemptible coward, to bring me to a place like this—from which you know I cannot get away without your assistance—and then force me to listen to words most untrue and most hateful to me ! Take me home at once, Lord Berresford ; I will not listen to another sentence ! ’

‘ My cowardice about this matter is a subject I will not discuss with you, beyond saying that it was no settled plan

of mine our coming here at all,' he answers calmly; 'and that you know well. But even you yourself do not deny your want of affection for Claude Ruthyn, so you cannot accuse me of untruthfulness in that one statement at all events.'

'If I do not love, at least I will be loyal to him,' Miss Blake says unguardedly; 'and, as I have promised, so I will perform. I shall most surely marry him.'

'I was right, then—you do not love him,' replies he, very quietly. 'Then, after all, I think of we two you are by far the greater coward.'

'That I can never be,' with quick, bitter emphasis. 'Will you row me over, Lord Berresford, or must I try to get back by myself?'

'Presently,' he says, with calm masculine superiority of tone, 'when I have proved to you how culpable your conduct is. You are going wilfully to do the man to whom you are engaged the greatest injury a woman can do any man—to marry him, to bestow upon him your beautiful self, while your heart lives restlessly elsewhere—all because you have not the moral courage to confess that your love was never his. And do you imagine, Theo, that afterwards, when he discovers—as he undoubtedly will—the living lie he has been cherishing, he will thank you for the hollow gift?'

'I think he will,' she answers defiantly, although her lips have grown white as death; 'all your arguments fail to convince my conscience that Claude will be glad to get rid of me. I know it would break his heart were I to put an end to our engagement; and so in time I shall acknowledge all, and he will forgive me and marry me.'

'Very well—if your obstinacy carries you to that point, your unhappiness be upon your own head,' Berresford says angrily, moving as though to descend the pathway; but, changing his purpose the next moment, he turns suddenly, and, taking both her hands between his own, exclaims passionately—

'Oh, Theo, my beautiful darling, you will not be so cruel—you will not sacrifice all the happiness of both our lives for the sake of this unhappy engagement? You must see how madly I love you—how unspeakably happy this last month has been to me! And Heaven knows it is but little happiness I have enjoyed through all my life up to the present time. Is your dear hand to be the one to wreck the only true peace I have ever known? Theo, have pity! Remember how deso-

late my life has been, and how desolate it must remain to the end if you still refuse to listen to me. Speak, darling, and tell me that my love is not quite hopeless.'

'What can I say to you?' the poor child replies in a faint, choking voice. 'I cannot do the great wrong you ask me. Oh, Lord Berresford, at least I was contented until I saw you, and now—now—— But you will go away—you will leave me? I ask this last kindness of you from my heart, and I pray Heaven I may never see your face again, so that in the end I may go to Claude Ruthyn, if not with my whole love, at least with a clear conscience.'

At the mention of Ruthyn's name, Loÿs's face darkens perceptibly once more, and he lets one of Miss Blake's hands fall to her side, while he breathes almost savagely from between his teeth—

'That is your answer; now take mine. I swear that as long as I live Ruthyn shall never have you—never! You are mine by right of our love, and I will hold you against yourself and the world. I have sworn it, and by this kiss I seal my oath!' saying which, with a sudden impulse he stoops and presses a warm, almost fierce caress on the hand he still retains, and then abruptly turning, without another word he descends rapidly the small pathway, leaving the girl to follow more slowly in his wake.

CHAPTER VII.

It has grown dusk, and a shadowy stillness seems to make more holy the beauty of the declining day, as Theo takes her place again in the tiny boat, the water-lilies Loÿs had given her when first they started still resting in her belt. With a sudden, quick anger she removes them and flings them far from her into the peaceful water, where they lie tossing to and fro, amongst their living species, like restless spirits come to haunt once more their former homes. Seeing the childish action, Berresford almost smiles, and, pausing for a moment in his occupation of rowing, says quietly—

'It is no use, Theo—you cannot face all those people again without the lilies you were so anxious to procure; so you must even suffer the flowers that come from me to sully

your hands for a few minutes longer,' stooping as he speaks to pluck another handful while the boat passes slowly through them.

'I will gather them for myself, then,' she says, with sweet petulance, pushing up her sleeve, and stretching out a bare soft arm and hand that show snow-white against the blue-green water as far as they can reach.

'If you stir another inch you will upset the boat,' Loÿs says, coolly. 'Don't be a simpleton, Theo. Do you suppose that we two, knowing each other as we do, shall be content to go through the world from this day forth without exchanging any more civilities unto our lives' end? You know better than that, I fancy. You see we have been, up to this, rather too much to one another to be able to "cry off" at a moment's notice; so you must make the best you can of me until I have won my cause and can claim you as my own, which will surely happen sooner or later. It is Fate, child—or Fortune, whichever you like to call her—and you will have to submit; only do not blame me, but her, that in her blindness she sent you first Claude Ruthyn instead of Loÿs Berresford. Here, take my flowers, and let us be friends.'

Obediently, and as though almost convinced by the calm certainty of his tone how fruitless a thing it is to strive against destiny, she takes his flowers, holding out, to receive them, the little, cold, bare hand she has just been dabbling in the water; and Loÿs, inexpressibly touched by the sweet sadness of her yielding, kisses, for the second time that evening, the small wet hand he retains in his own for a moment.

When at length they touch the bank from which they started, it occurs to Miss Blake that it must be considerably later than she imagines, as the guests seem greatly thinned since she left, and those that remain exhibit evident symptoms of impatience while they wait anxiously for their several carriages. As she and Berresford cross the lawn together—both silent, the girl carrying her small head high in the air, as though to defy comment to fall upon her—people look up, and ask, in mysterious whispers, 'Where can they have been?' and shake their heads wisely, as, with greedy love of scandal, they hope, ominously, 'that Miss Blake will not prove false to that charming Mr. Ruthyn, but Loÿs Berresford never yet caused anything but grief and annoyance to those unfortunate enough to be mixed up in his society; and if they were that silly girl's aunt——'

‘Good gracious, Theo, where have you been?’ cries Lady Mostyn, impatiently, as, at last, after half an hour’s tiresome search, she perceives her niece coming slowly towards her across the grass. ‘What have you been doing, child?’

‘I took a fancy to some water-lilies behind that small point; and Lord Berresford rowed me over to get them,’ Theo answers, flushing warmly.

‘But surely it has not taken you an hour to gather that amount of lilies!’ Lady Mostyn exclaims, glancing rather contemptuously at the three or four flowers the girl is holding. She is feeling rather weary after the incessant talking and other fatigues of the day, and is just a little vexed and disconcerted. ‘I don’t believe you know what time means.’

‘If you are determined to consign one of us to the galleys for life,’ breaks in Loÿs, jestingly, ‘let it be me, because it was quite my fault from beginning to end. Knowing Miss Blake’s thorough appreciation of all things beautiful, I took her up a small hill to see the sun go down on the water, and somehow we forgot all about the time. But we are awfully penitent, and we will never do it any more; and, if you will only forgive us now, we promise tearfully to avoid water-lilies and sunset views for the remainder of our days.’

‘Oh, Loÿs, I might have known that it was all your doing—you are never out of one mischief or another,’ her ladyship says, with a laugh, feeling all her usual good temper returning as she listens to her favourite’s voice; ‘but I should not have felt so anxious had I only known where Theo was—girls are so careless—and I could not even find Claude to assist me in my search.’

‘Have I been a defaulter also?’ Claude asks, who has joined the group a moment before. ‘Well, I am scarcely to blame, as Marston would inveigle me into the house to see his new billiard-room, and kept me there ever since playing with him, although he knows as much about the game as he does about dancing a fandango, I should say; and the misfortune of the thing is that the man is fully impressed with the idea that his strokes are most uncommonly scientific and masterly. Considering the purgatory I have been undergoing, I am sure you will not add to my punishment, Lady Mostyn, by abusing me for want of attention.’

‘Come away.’ Lady Mostyn says, laughing heartily, her good humour now fully restored—‘I insist on your all coming at once, as I verily believe you will stay talking here until

Doomsday if I do not interfere, and—no, I won't scold you—where is the use of it, when I know that you would do the very same thing again to-morrow if you only had the chance? I shall reserve my eloquence for some future period. Theo, my dearest, you are looking very pale and used up. Go into the hall and say good-bye to Mrs. Marston and Ethel—I left them there a moment ago—and then follow me,' saying which her ladyship accepts Claude Ruthyn's arm, and moves off to her carriage.

'Well, Theo, I hope you enjoyed yourself, dear?' her aunt asks, presently, when they have left the Marstons' house some distance behind them.

'Yes—no—pretty well,' the girl answers wearily; 'the sun was intensely warm—wasn't it?'

'Yes, we are going to have an early summer, I fancy,' Claude says; adding tenderly, 'you are looking very tired, my darling—the sun was too much for you, I fear. See how those flowers are fading in your hand,' pointing to the luckless lilies that now lie drooping and withering in her warm clasp, dying for want of the rippling water on the cool bright surface of which they had lain so lazily only one short hour ago.

Miss Blake sighs a half-impatient, passionate sigh as she gazes down upon them, beautified as they are with sweet, forbidden memories—all the more sweet, perhaps, in that she knows they must be ever forbidden to her; and, taking out her handkerchief, she covers the flowers gently with it, so holding them until she and her aunt reach home, when they are the last things she looks at and kisses and weeps over before she goes to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

'THEO, are you quite determined?'

'Yes, I am quite determined,' Miss Blake says; and then there is a pause.

The speakers are standing in Lady Hancourt's conservatory, alone, with no sound to disturb them save the desolate drip, drip, of a small fountain close by, and the faint dreamy echo of a waltz as it steals pathetically through the leaves and

flowers only to fall unheeded on their ears. Miss Blake is dressed in white, with no gleaming gem or fleck of colour to mar its fair purity, as she stands, a piece of soft, warm, living loveliness, against the background of cold green leaves and perfumed flowers.

For a few minutes there is silence—minutes that seem to her to be the longest hour she has ever known—and then her companion speaks.

‘Do you know what you are about to do when you say that?’

‘Yes; I know that I am about to do my duty—which it is only right that I should do, though you make it very hard and bitter for me.’

‘Your duty!’ the young man cries, fiercely—it is Loïs Berresford. ‘Good heavens, Theo, how can you stand so coldly there talking about your “duty” while you are willing away my very soul? Is it your duty, do you think, to send me straight to destruction, and ruin all your own happiness for life?’

‘It is my duty to keep to this engagement—you know it is,’ she says, desperately. ‘As for my own happiness, that is a thing of the past. I shall never be happy again in this world. And you—you oh, Loïs, I shall pray on my knees both night and day that you may be saved from the misery you speak of.’

‘You may spare your prayers,’ he says, with a short mocking laugh. ‘Keep them for those they may benefit, but do not waste them upon me; I am past all that, I fancy. With you, I feel I could have been something; but, losing you, I lose all hope and you can understand what that means to a man of my nature. Then, changing his tone, and clasping her hands so that he almost hurts her with the passion of his grasp—‘Oh, Theo, for pity’s sake think once again—once again before you condemn me to what is worse than death.’

‘Oh, why will you not understand me?’ the girl cries vehemently. ‘Why will you make it so hard for me?’ You know that my father, my aunt, and all my family know and approve of this engagement, and that they would never forgive me the dishonour of breaking my plighted word. I believe it would almost kill papa; and Claude—oh, poor Claude, poor Claude!’ breaking down into an irrepressible sob of bitter pain—‘when I think of him I dare not—you see it comes to

this, that I dare not—tell them what is lying so heavily on my conscience.’

‘Then run away with me,’ Lord Berresford says, with sudden decision.

She shivers and shrinks slightly away from him; but he, not letting her go, only holds her hand the tighter, drawing her back again to him with quiet force as he continues—

‘Yes; what is there in it that you should look so horrified if you dare not tell them all? Is it not better for you to come away with me privately and so escape it?’

‘Do you know what you are saying to me?’ Theo asks, with white lips that tremble as she tries to speak calmly. ‘Do you know what you are asking me to do? Have you not heard what the world thinks of a woman who does what you have mentioned—how she is slighted and lightly spoken of? Do you not know that it would probably break my father’s heart? Oh, Loÿs, Loÿs, have some pity! See—I that have never stooped to ask a favour twice of any man before—I implore—I pray of you to go away for ever, and leave me alone with my unhappiness.’

‘You forget my oath,’ he says, coldly, but with deep determination; and just at this moment, raising their eyes instinctively, they perceive Claude Ruthyn coming slowly towards them through the long conservatory beyond.

‘You are unmerciful—ungenerous,’ she murmurs, despairingly. ‘If I could get away from your sight, I would do it gladly; but where can I go that you could not find me? Will nothing turn you from this design that you seem to have set your heart upon?’

‘Nothing but death,’ Berresford answers very sadly, in no wise turned from his purpose by Theo’s beseeching words.

‘Then may Heaven forgive you!’ she says, solemnly, raising her face to his; and then for a little time they gaze at each other silently.

Her eyes are large and sweet and lovable as ever, but in their depths there seems to lie, half lost, a shadow, as of coming evil, mingled with present pain, and, seeing it, a great remorse fills the young man’s breast.

‘It will be of much more consequence to me if you forgive me,’ he whispers, hurriedly. ‘Theo, do not look so white and frightened. I cannot leave you like this—your face would haunt me. Will you not say something kind to me before you go? Oh, darling, say that you forgive me!’

‘I do—you know I do,’ she says sadly; and the next instant Claude Ruthyn is within speaking distance.

‘It is our dance, Theo, is it not?’ he asks; and without another word or look at Loÿs, Miss Blake accepts the proffered arm, and moves away quietly.

Very silently together, and without smile or observation from either of them, Theo and Claude Ruthyn pass slowly through the fragrant flowers until they reach the door that opens into the ball-room. She is feeling utterly crushed and miserable after the last scene with Loÿs, and it is with the most intense pain and distaste that she approaches once more the brilliant throng of dancers, who, passing and repassing in all the enjoyment of Vanity Fair, seem to her excited fancy to be wondering at her and reading carelessly the torturing secret lying hidden in her bosom. All life and brightness seem to have departed from her, leaving only a cold numb sensation of treachery toward the man at her side which oppresses her heavily, weighing her down, and trampling all her fair honour in the dust; while in her heart, poor child, surges up every now and then a vague undefined wonder as to what will be the end of it all, mingled with a wretched longing to know her own fate, and the fate of these two men who love her, and who are both very dear to her, though one of them is—and must ever be—inmeasurably the dearer.

Claude notices her silence and the rather wearied look upon her face, and wonders in his turn what ‘that fellow Berresford’ could have been saying to her when he came upon them so suddenly a minute ago in the conservatory, and asks himself why there should have been such a strange uncomfortable pause when he had reached her side. Could he have been—— And then Claude recollects how frequently he has seen them together of late, though he had thought nothing of it at the time, and a cold pang of intense agony shoots through his heart, leaving him very faint and sick while it lasts.

‘What was Berresford saying to you, Theo?’ he asks at length.

‘What was he saying to me?’ she repeats, while her heart stops for a moment and then beats on again so tumultuously that she almost fears its throbbing will be heard. ‘How can I remember what he said? Some of the thousand and one things, I suppose, that one’s partner always says to one.’

‘I do not like you to be so much with him,’ Ruthyn says;

‘he is not a fit companion for you, and certainly not the sort of man you could make a friend of.’

‘Is he not?’ the girl asks, listlessly, lowering her eyes.

‘No, he is not; he is both reckless and dissipated—or at least he was—and I myself do not much believe in reformed characters. But you surely must have heard by this time in what very low estimation he is held by the world?’

‘I do not believe he is one bit worse than most people,’ Miss Blake says, decidedly. ‘Unfortunately his sins have been more open, and the world has had a splendid opportunity for condemning his conduct and proclaiming its own virtues. His cousin and aunt Geraldine take his part—and I dare say they know more about him than most people.’

‘I hardly fancy that even your aunt Geraldine would consider his conduct to have been that of a highly-principled man,’ he answers, coldly. ‘Of course, if you are determined to look upon him in the light of an injured individual, I cannot prevent you; but there was a time, not so very long ago, when people refused to acknowledge him as an acquaintance.’

‘And yet all these people, now that he has come into another large property, seem only too glad to welcome him even within the precincts of their private homes,’ Theo says, with quiet sarcasm, while a sudden light gleams in her eyes, and she compresses her small mouth defiantly.

‘Since his return I hear that he has signified his intention of altering his mode of life, which may perhaps account for the change in thier demeanour,’ Claude answers, noticing the compression of her lips, and resenting bitterly in his heart the interest she evidently takes in this *vaurien*. ‘But, for all that, he will scarcely be able to live down the many former stories told against him.’

‘You are a bitter enemy of his,’ Miss Blake says; and Ruthyn feels that he is only damaging his own cause without doing any good.

‘No, I am not his enemy,’ he explains, quickly; ‘neither am I his friend—we are perfectly indifferent to each other. I simply do not consider him a fit associate for you.’

‘Is he worth all this talk?’ Miss Blake asks impatiently. ‘I would rather never have a friend than be spoken to like this. You asked me to dance, did you not? Then pray let us dance, as anything is better than sitting here abusing our neighbours.’

But after two rounds she thinks she has had enough of it,

and, stopping abruptly, sinks into a cushioned chair near her with a listless, weary air about her, very sad to see on her usually bright, happy face. She has a headache, she says; would he mind sitting down with her, or getting himself another partner, as the dancing makes her so much worse? And when he refuses to leave her, she still remains in the same languid position, staring vacantly before her, and exchanging no words or looks with him or any one.

About half an hour afterwards Lady Mostyn, coming across the room, rests her hand upon her shoulder, and asks her kindly whether she has yet had enough of dancing; and, Miss Blake confessing for the first time in her life that she has had quite enough of it, her ladyship expresses her opinion that home is by far the best place for them; and Theo having willingly concurred in this sentiment, they go.

It is very broad daylight indeed, however, before she closes her eyes, miserable recollections and fancies hunting each other through her restless brain, and chasing all slumber from her tired lids, the consequence of which is, that when, at eleven o'clock next morning, her maid comes to arouse her, she finds Miss Blake in such a deep, dreamless sleep, that, being a good country girl, and devotedly attached to her young mistress, she cannot find it in her heart to awake her, and discreetly sends Lady Mostyn's French importation to inquire what is the most advisable thing to be done under the circumstances.

Aunt Geraldine returning word that her niece is on no account to be disturbed for breakfast, or any other reason, sleep being, in her ladyship's opinion, of more value than all the breakfasts in Christendom—except perhaps a wedding breakfast—Theo is allowed to remain in a sweet refreshing slumber until the day is far advanced.

About two o'clock she opens her eyes, to see the bright Spring sunshine gleaming down upon her, as though reproaching her for unpardonable laziness, and, springing out of bed, she is shocked to find by her watch how very closely she has been imitating the sluggard. In spite of the horror she entertains for her own slothfulness, however, she cannot help admitting how considerably the better she feels for her long sleep, and, dressing herself rapidly, finishes the breakfast her maid brings to her room, and, going downstairs presently to the morning-room, finds there her aunt and young Charlie Christian in high 'confab.'

'I hope neither of you has the audacity to imagine for a moment that I am only just out of bed,' she commences austere: 'if so, you are labouring under a heavy delusion; because, though I say good morning to you now for the first time to-day, still I beg you to understand that I have been for the last three hours studying Mrs. Hannah More in my own room. How d'ye do, aunt Geraldine?' kissing her. 'Good morning, Charlie.'

'Good *afternoon*, madam,' says young Christian. 'I was just telling your aunt that it was cruelty to animals on your part to vanish last night at the very moment when my favourite waltz with you was beginning.'

'Was it just beginning?' Miss Blake asks innocently. 'Then why did you not remind me of it? Have you never heard of the dumb priest? He lost his benefice, you know—and you lost your dance. Of course, had I only recollected that a waltz with you was coming off, such is my opinion of your dancing that I should in all probability have been there now, rather than have come away without it.'

'Oh yes, I am sure of that,' the boy answers, blushing vividly, and looking intensely pleased, although he knows as well as she does that her compliment is all fun.

'One letter—two letters,' Theo says, taking up a brace of missives that lie on the table before her; 'and both for me. I suppose you did not care to disturb me, aunt Geraldine, by sending them up? This is from papa, I know, but I do not recognise this. Will you both think me fearfully rude if I go over to the window and satisfy my curiosity?' breaking the seal, and walking towards the light as she speaks.

There is silence for a moment, succeeded by the rustling of paper, as she turns the page, and then she emerges once more from amongst the window-curtains, her pretty face lit up with excitement and animation.

'Oh, aunt Geraldine, here is something for you to exert your energies upon. I must go to Todminster this evening, whatever happens.'

'My dear Theo,' exclaims Lady Mostyn, with all the emphasis she is capable of bestowing on her words, 'what are you saying?'

'Yes, I must go to Todminster this very evening,' declares Miss Blake, decisively. 'The letter is from Clarissa Saville, telling me she sails for India on Friday, and reminding me of my promise to spend her last day with her. You see I

cannot break my word to her, aunt Geraldine; so do, like a darling, try to manage it for me."

It is now three o'clock, and I suppose you are not going to travel alone by the night mail?' says Lady Mostyn, with considerable dignity. 'Then, will you never have sense? Do you not see the thing is an impossibility? And surely, if your friend Miss Saville really did wish you to spend her last day with her, she could very well have written to you a week ago instead of the day before.'

'But my dear Clarissa was ever and always a most enchanting little goose,' explains Miss Saville's friend; 'and geese never have any sense—so she is not to be blamed. Besides, she wrote two days before, only I was not up in time, you see, to start by the morning train. Charlie, you look exactly as if you had something to suggest; try, like a dear boy, to help me if you can. But, if you can't, do take that exceedingly important expression off your face.'

'I am thinking,' says young Christian—I am thinking, Miss Blake, that Mrs. Morley goes down every Wednesday to see her daughter, who is living at Benton—which is just the last station before you come to Todminster, you know—and for some reason or other she generally travels by the night train. Would she do? Of course she would be delighted to take care of you so far.'

'The very thing,' cries Theo, eagerly. 'There, aunt Geraldine, you can say nothing after that, as Mrs. Morley is one of the sternest old moralists we know. Charlie, you are a rock of sense. I will go even farther, and say that you are a brick—whatever that means, and I shall never again believe any of the hundred and one foolish stories I have heard about you. Now will you add to your kindness by taking a note at once from me to aunt Geraldine's moralist?'

'Of course I will,' says little Christian, who would have gone to Central Africa cheerfully had she asked him; 'if you write it now, I will get it there in no time.'

'Theo, darling, mildly suggests Lady Mostyn, who is completely overpowered by Miss Blake's manner, and totally incapable of putting a stop to her arrangements, would it not be better to send Lawson with it, and so save Charlie the trouble?'

'No,' decides her niece, shaking her wilful little head over the writing table, where she is busy concocting a suitable letter to Mrs. Morley—'no, aunt Geraldine. Knowing Charlie's

delightful suavity of manner, and remembering his flowery eloquence, I have made up my mind that he shall plead for me, especially as I rather suspect Mrs. Morley looks upon me in the light of one of the daughters of Belial, and will very probably object to taking charge of me at all.'

'If I thought that, my dear, I should certainly not go with her on any account, were I you,' begins her ladyship, haughtily; 'and, besides——'

'Yes—no—I suppose so,' says Miss Blake, abstractedly, looking back over her letter. '"My dear Mrs. Morley,—Would you be so kind—so kind—as to——"' Aunt Geraldine, if you interrupt me again I shall infallibly go wrong in my spelling.' After which admonition there is total silence on the part of the other two until the all-important note is finished; when Theo despatches Charlie with it, giving him at the same time a number of reasons for the extreme necessity of her being in Todminster to-night.

'In fact, make it a case of life or death,' concludes Miss Blake; 'because the horrid old woman detests me so, ever since Lena's lover proved faithless, that she will certainly get out of it if she can—so do not let her.'

So instructed, young Christian sets off on his mission, returning triumphantly in about an hour, with his handsome beardless face flushed like a peony from his unexpected success.

'It is all right, Miss Blake; she was civility itself, and said she would be only too delighted, and all that, you know. I am afraid I told her no end of stories about it, and paid so many compliments to the old lady herself, that I think she has some grave ideas on the subject of my being spooney about her.'

Some hours later Theo is seated opposite Mrs. Morley, in a first-class compartment all to themselves, pretending to listen to that lady's austere conversation, while all the time she is feeling—with a strange mixture of sadness and peace at her heart—that for three days at least she is leaving London and Loÿs Berresford far behind her.

Now that all the excitement of preparing for this journey is at an end, and as she comprehends clearly that she is well on her way to Todminster, her natural flow of spirits suddenly subsides; and, though she hates and despises herself for the weakness, still, somehow, sadness creeps up and kills her peace, leaving only the secret knowledge of how miserably

she will miss Lord Berresford's usual morning visit to-morrow. What will he think? she wonders. Will he understand how gladly she accepted this chance of escaping his presence for a few days? Or will he only look upon it as a girlish freak—the fulfilment of a silly promise? Ah, how different she was in the old days when first that promise was made!

Meanwhile Mrs. Morley has sunk into a comfortable doze, out of which she is aroused presently by the stoppage of the train, and the guard's voice informing the passengers that Bexton is reached. Some people are possessed of the happy gift of being able to remember exactly everything they ought to remember, even when shaken out of the heaviest slumber; and of such is Mrs. Morley.

'My dear,' she says to Theo, the very instant she sits up after the deepest sleep mortal was ever blessed with—'my dear, will you hand me my umbrella, which is just above your head? Thank you, that is it. I am sorry I cannot go with you the entire way—very sorry indeed. Well, good-bye, my dear; I shall tell the guard to take care of you,' with which parting promise she says farewell and disappears into the darkness.

Theo is again sinking into thoughts half sweet, half bitter, when the door of the compartment once more opens, and she perceives a dark figure standing amidst the blackness of the night. It is the guard, she thinks—Mrs. Morley is evidently a woman of her word—and, looking up to satisfy herself more perfectly about her new protector, she sees Loÿs Berresford standing in the carriage.

For a moment her breath fails, and every drop of blood in her body rushes wildly to her face, only to leave it again immediately, and then she murmurs—

'Loÿs!'

'Yes, it is actually myself,' he says, quite quietly, taking the vacant place beside her. 'I have surprised you.'

'Why have you done this? You should not have done it,' the girl exclaims with quivering lips, 'when you know——'

'I know that as well as you do,' he interrupts; 'but where have I ever achieved that which I ought to have achieved? Never, I fancy. So, when young Christian told me to-day, on his way to Mrs. Morley's, that you were going to Todminster, I made up my mind that I would accompany you, and persuade you to break the resolution you formed last night.'

‘Then I shall not listen to a word you say,’ Theo says, with Spartan determination, putting up her hands to her ears.

‘Nonsense,’ laughs Loÿs lightly, while he removes one of her hands, and holds it close prisoner in his own. ‘How can you be so absurd, darling? Do you know, sometimes I fancy you are Minerva herself, and then immediately afterwards I discover that you are the veriest child of my acquaintance? Now, Theo, understand me. I will not leave you again until you have consented to become my wife. It is only a question of time, I know, so why make the end farther than it need be?’

For all answer she draws away, with a quick, impatient gesture and an angry sigh, the hand he has retained while speaking, while she almost vows in her own mind that she will speak with him no more; but presently, glancing slowly upwards, though half against her will, she meets his intent gaze, and, as she looks, her eyes grow large and black with tears, while a forbidden sob, rising rebelliously, half chokes her utterance, as, with wild, vehement bitterness, she says—

‘Oh, Loÿs, Loÿs, I think my heart is breaking!’

Something in the beautiful, passionate face, something in the words themselves, and more than all, something perhaps in the charm of the action with which she has, in her pain and in her dumb entreaty, replaced her hand in his, go straight to Loÿs’s heart. For a moment he fights a hard and desperate battle with himself, and then, having conquered, he says quietly and very sadly—

‘My poor love, my poor little darling, have I been so cruel to you that you must needs speak of a broken heart? Well, now I shall be cruel to myself—how cruel you can never guess—and shall give you the one more chance your honour covets. See’—drawing from his pocket a pack of cards—‘I will play you three rounds of any game you choose, now on the spot; and if you win two out of the three, I swear most faithfully that I will look upon your face no more. Are you content?’

‘Yes, I am content,’ the girl answers, strangely, after a pause of about two minutes, during which they gaze steadily into each other’s eyes, and read all the love and pain and misery lying so sadly there; and, as they gaze, thoughts not all dissimilar crowd through their throbbing hearts—the man thinking that, if he loses her, he loses all his hopes on earth, and all his dreams of peace; while the girl whispers half wildly to herself that if she wins she will at last be free.

Free—but ah, what freedom! She will keep her honour and Claude Ruthyn's love, but Loïs Berresford must for evermore be counted as one dead. So, while her heart is venting passionate protests against the cruel words, her voice only murmurs coldly and calmly, 'Yes, I am content.'

'I am glad of that,' he answers, with a little curious wavering smile. 'And now, for the last time, Theo, understand me clearly: I will play you three games of *écarté*—that is the game you play best, is it not?—and two out of three wins. If I win, you are mine—mine alone, remember, and irrevocably. If you win, I resign you to Claude Ruthyn, and while I live I will never see you again,' with which he changes his seat, taking the place exactly opposite, and begins to shuffle the cards.

The first game is ended, and Theo finds herself the victor. She has played her cards most creditably throughout, although she knows that final success means only future separation from all she loves, and cannot entirely suppress the flush of joy that crimsones her pale cheeks when the second round leaves Loïs triumphant. He says nothing until they come to the last, the crowning one, that must for ever decide whether these two shall be all in all to each other, or less than the commonest acquaintance; and then he pauses in his deal, his face becoming, if possible, whiter than her own, as, leaning forward, and placing his hand upon hers, he says, with unwonted pathos and with heavy unshed tears dimming the rare beauty of his dark blue eyes—

'Theo, it is very near the end, my darling, is it not? I feel as a man must feel when he is bidding a last farewell to all he holds most sacred upon earth; for you indeed have made for me the happiest moments of my life. My own dear love—see, I yet call you mine, although I cannot tell what fate awaits me—now that it has come to the very last, and that perhaps soon I shall have no right even to look in your dear face, I want to tell you once again how undying is my love for you; and I pray of you to place your hand in mine as a token that you forgive me all the pain I most unwillingly have caused you.'

Unable to speak—unable to utter a word—she can only, with mute despairing tenderness, place within his own the little hand he loves so well; and, as much satisfied as if she had spoken, he holds it closely for a moment, after which he turns back to the dreaded game.

A few minutes of excitement that amount almost to positive agony pass slowly, and then suddenly Loÿs, Lord Berresford, flings down his cards, proving himself the winner.

‘You are mine—my own!’ he cries, a world of passionate relief and thankfulness in his voice, as the cards fall unchecked upon the floor of the carriage, and he catches her hands in his. ‘Oh, Theo, will you not say that you too are glad?’

He gazes as he speaks into the fair beauty of her face, striving to read in her divine eyes an answering gladness to his own; but he is unable to fathom the expression of her features, fear and relief and the fierce wild joy surging up within her breast having proved more than her strength can bear. She draws away her hands, covering her pallid face with them, and bursts into a very storm of silent sobs.

Frightened, shocked by the intensity of her emotion, he tries to soothe her, calling her by all the tender epithets his love suggests; and finally, ere the train steams into the dreary station, he succeeds in restoring her to her wonted composure.

‘Todminster!’ announces one of the officials, as the engine slowly draws up to the platform.

Loÿs finds the Saville carriage waiting for Miss Blake, and, having seen to the luggage, places her in it, lingering for a moment before giving final directions to the coachman.

‘Theo,’ he says, softly, ‘before I go you will say to me to-night, for the first time, what you have never yet said, will you not? Do you know you have never even told me that you liked me. Will you say to me now, “Loÿs, I love you”?’

‘Loÿs, I love you,’ she answers, raising her head so that the moonbeams fall full upon her marvellous loveliness; and, Loÿs bending a little forward, their lips meet, so sealing their strange betrothal.

‘It is all over now,’ thinks Miss Blake, as under the quiet stars the carriage rolls swiftly towards Saville Hall—‘it is all quite over; and I shall never be able to look my father in the face again. If any one had told me last year that I was born to be classed amongst those women who have eloped, and been looked down upon by the rest of the world, what should I have said, I wonder? I shall never have any claim on a good woman’s respect again—never. And yet—and yet—for all the respect the world could shower upon me, I would not now give up Loÿs Berresford.’ So, with his kiss still warm upon

her lips, Miss Blake sits and thinks of him, her changed life, her father's anger, and of many other things, until the stoppage of the carriage announces her arrival at the Hall; and in another minute she is warmly clasped in Clarissa Saville's arms.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE week later and all London is ringing with the news of how Miss Blake has thrown over Mr. Ruthyn and eloped with Lord Berresford; and many are the comments, innuendoes, and slighting words bestowed upon these two who have outraged Society so grossly.

Miss Blake writes her father a short, imploring, pitiful letter, confessing all, and entreating earnestly that in time he will try to look upon her conduct in a more lenient light than she can dare to expect just at present; and to Lady Mostyn she also addresses a somewhat longer though very similar letter; the result of which correspondence is that Sir John—when the first stunning effects of this totally unexpected blow are past—comes up post-haste to London, and immediately proceeds to abuse Lady Mostyn, as much as it is in that kindly old gentleman's nature to abuse any one.

'I assure you,' protests poor Lady Geraldine, when at last he gives her an opportunity for speech—'I assure you, John, I saw no more of it than if I had been residing at the Antipodes.'

'And, bless my soul, Geraldine, is not that the very thing I am blaming you for?' exclaims Sir John, in a high state of indignation. 'What you could have been thinking of, with the man under your very nose making love to the girl, I cannot conceive. If you were blind or deaf I could make some allowance for your neglect, but as it was—as it was,' continues Sir John, waxing very wroth and striding fiercely up and down the room, 'I could almost find it in my heart to call you a fool.'

'You can call me what you please,' answers her ladyship, by this time in a towering rage herself, and feeling rather undecided as to what would be the better course to pursue—whether to cry or to order him out of the house—'you are a man, while I am only a woman, and you are quite at liberty,

no doubt, to call me whatever names you choose; but really——'

'Oh well—well —Sir John interrupts her apologetically—
'I did not mean that of course; you understand, my dear, that I was only wondering how a woman of your extreme good sense could have been so thoroughly hoodwinked. I was simply thinking——'

'It does not matter in the very least what you were thinking,' exclaims aunt Geraldine, impatiently; 'the question is about this unhappy business. It is more than unfortunate; and I must say—although she is my own niece, and you know how fond I was of her—that, of all the deceitful girls I ever met with, Theo is the worst.

'She is not,' contradicts Sir John. 'I never found her deceitful or underhanded in any way; she was always a good girl—a darling girl—and it was all that depraved villain's fault from beginning to end. Of that I am quite convinced—nothing could alter my opinion—and besides, I know that in the long run he will ill-treat her, the scoundrel! Tell me, Geraldine—you may as well at once—what sort of man my son-in-law is!'

'Well, he is handsome, you know,' begins her ladyship eagerly, trying nervously to recollect all Berresford's best points, in the hope of making her own negligence in the affair thereby appear lighter.

'H m!—"handsome is as handsome does." ' growls the old man defiantly, perfectly unappeased by the mention of Lord Berresford's appearance. 'A Satanic sort of face, I suppose? Poor?'

'No, quite the contrary—one of the richest men in England since his uncle's death, and of a very old family. His father was——'

'Oh, never mind his father!' says Sir John. 'Much good his family will do my poor girl when he begins to abuse her, as he is sure to do sooner or later. But what are we to do in the matter, Geraldine? How are we to get her away from him? Have you thought of any plan, eh?'

'Plan!' echoes the astonished Lady Mostyn. 'No, indeed I have not. What would be the use of concocting one when I know she would not leave him? And really'—with considerable hesitation—'when one comes to think of it, I do not see why she should, because, on the whole, you know, John, he is a very nice young man.'

‘A nice young man!’ exclaims the irascible old Baronet, with undisguised contempt. ‘In truth I believe he must be just that, to come and run away with a gentleman’s daughter as he has done—a nice young man! I am astonished at you, Geraldine—I am—to see you supporting, against your conscience, the character of a man who must be, and I have no doubt is, a most consummate villain.’

‘He is nothing of the kind,’ her ladyship answers angrily, who five minutes previously has been vilifying Loÿs to her heart’s content, but now that she hears him openly attacked by another comes boldly to the rescue; ‘he is a perfect gentleman in every respect—rich, handsome, and well bred; just a little wild perhaps—but every man is that more or less until he settles down. I am sure my own poor George, when I first knew him—— Well, well, to return to what I was saying, I think matters might have been decidedly worse, and it is much better for you to make the best of it than to go on fuming as you are now doing without the faintest result.’

‘If I had not sent her up to London, this would not have happened,’ rather ungenerously retaliates Sir John; ‘and what the deuce am I to say to that poor Ruthyn when I see him?’

‘Do not see him at all,’ suggests her ladyship.

‘I suppose I must see him some time or other before I die; and then—— Well, Geraldine, if any fellow had told me a year ago that my girl would have treated me in such a manner, I should have knocked him down—I should, upon my honour.’

‘Then I am very glad nobody did tell you,’ his sister answers, quietly. And Sir John resumes his promenade, restless and angry as it is, up and down the room. At last he turns again towards the arm-chair in which Lady Mostyn is sitting, lost in thought, and says, in deep agitation—

‘For Heaven’s sake, Geraldine, suggest something—anything, in preference to sitting there like that with your hands before you! You used to have great common sense long ago; surely it has not all deserted you. When I think of that child’s ungrateful, disgraceful conduct, I am ready to go mad. To deceive us all so shamefully! I shall never forgive her—never! But, for all that, how can I leave her in the hands of this reprobate, who will, in all probability, break her gentle heart—my poor darling! Did she send you her address?’

‘No; she sent me no clue to her whereabouts whatever,

but says they will travel for six months. Look here, John,' rising, as she speaks, and linking her arm in his, 'it is no use your going on in this way. For the first two days I fretted my life out also; but soon, seeing how little good it was likely to do me, I gave it up. The man is a gentleman—it is enough to see him to know that—and with a girl like Theo, to whom he is devoted, he cannot fail to become a good man. So take courage, and look the thing fairly in the face, and I feel certain in the end all will be well. Be guided by me, my dear—do; and in the days to come you will acknowledge how true were my words. There, I see you are half convinced already that matters will mend some time or other: so go upstairs now to your old room, and get yourself up for dinner, as it is very nearly half-past seven.' And, half-persuaded, half angry still, Sir John prepares to obey her, only pausing for a moment on the threshold to say, ominously—

'Geraldine, if I could only catch that Loïs Berresford this instant, I would——'

'You would think him, justly, one of the most charming men you ever met,' interrupts Geraldine, unceremoniously. 'Don't be a goose, John, but go away directly, or the soup will be cold.'

To Claude Ruthyn, Theo has sent neither letter nor message, but to aunt Geraldine, somewhat later, she despatches his ring, that it may be through her returned to him—a task her ladyship by no means appreciates.

After this the days pass rapidly and monotonously as usual, the only difference being that letters from Lady Berresford both to her father and aunt become more and more frequent. In one of them, with fear and trembling, she mentions her address, and receives by return of post a letter from her father more reproachfully loving than it is possible to imagine, which same epistle has the effect of causing her little graceless ladyship's heart to sing aloud for joy, and which she carries in her bosom for many a day after, sleeping at night with it under her pillow. Indeed from that day forth her cup of happiness seems quite full, and she and Loïs dream away the tranquil sunny hours under the bright Italian skies, until the summer and autumn are well-nigh spent, and both their thoughts turn longingly homewards.

CHAPTER X.

It is six months since Theo Blake took the daring step that made her Lady Berresford, and the London world has once more welcomed graciously to its bosom the beautiful fascinating girl who had charmed all hearts about half a year before. Indeed, Society has rather taken to petting this extremely wilful young woman who had so scandalised them a few short months ago, and Theo—much to her own astonishment—finds herself suddenly at the very topmost rung of the fashionable ladder, caressed and courted as she had never been even in her girlish days. Then, possibly, they were very jealous of her; but now—now—in spite of her great crimes and misdemeanours, this charming Lady Berresford is rich and prosperous and beautiful; so that, overlooking all her faults, dowagers with marriageable daughters, and dowagers with no daughters at all, fall down indiscriminately and worship her.

With her father she has had little trouble, he having—once he had caught sight of the exquisite pleading face—forgotten all back injuries, with their accompanying heart-aches, and received her gladly once more as his only and well-beloved child. It was in aunt Geraldine's drawing-room that these two who so dearly loved each other were reunited; and when Theo, with sweet penitence, entered the room, Sir John—though he had for two hours before been lecturing himself into a proper frame of mind wherein to receive her—could think of nothing, but took her simply in his arms, kissing her with almost more than the old warmth.

'Theo, how could you do it?' he had said, a little chidingly perhaps, but very tenderly; and she replied—

'Darling, do not blame me—see, this is Loÿs,' as though in him—her husband—lay all the excuse that need be given.

The two men had—as the common expression goes—taken to each other, Sir John finding it impossible with his genial nature to resist the charm of Berresford's manner; and so in the end all went 'merry' as the 'marriage bells' that ought to have rung at Theo Blake's wedding, but didn't.

It is Tuesday night, and the Berresfords, having either refused all invitations or received none for this evening, are sitting in their drawing-room after dinner, discussing—and

perhaps cutting up—their neighbours a good deal, Theo at length deciding with true feminine uncharitableness that the lady in question does wear false hair. Her husband surrenders his opinion with a gay laugh, and, going over to the hearth-rug, stands gazing down dreamily into the fire. Presently he propounds another idea, but, receiving no answer, looks up to see his wife coming slowly towards him with a curiously settled expression on her face. She puts her arms around his neck lovingly, saying in a pretty, soft low tone—

‘Loÿs, I am not quite happy.’

‘Not quite happy,’ Loÿs repeats, examining with wonder the little troubled face turned so beseechingly to his. ‘Why, what can have happened to disturb my pet’s equanimity? Has her favourite poodle come to an untimely end?’

‘Oh, no—no. Now do be sensible, my own Loÿs, and listen to me; I want your help so much.’

‘Very well, then—I will be a second Solomon upon the spot; and I pledge myself both to listen and help you—there!’

‘That’s a dear boy; and now I will tell you what I have been dying to disclose all through dinner, only Barton would not leave the room. Guess’—hesitating here, and turning the gold stud in his shirt round and round with small, shy fingers—‘guess who I saw to-day when driving in the Park.’

‘The Emperor of China,’ suggests Loÿs, calmly, and with an air of settled conviction, smoothing back the hair from his wife’s temples. ‘Was his high and mighty Majesty enchanted to see you?’

‘Now, Loÿs’—reproachfully—‘is that being sensible? No, you would never guess; so I may as well tell you. It was Claude Ruthyn. And oh, darling’—raising sweet, pathetic eyes, heavy with pitying tears—‘he looked so haggard, so tired and miserable, that I scarcely knew him. He caught a glimpse of me as I was passing; and the shadow of pain that darkened his face I shall never forget—it nearly broke my heart.’ Which little speech, together with the remembrance of poor Ruthyn’s wrongs, proving too much for Lady Berresford, she finishes by falling into bitter sobbing.

‘My dearest,’ whispers Loÿs, tenderly caressing her, and trying to soothe her remorse, ‘it was not your fault—it was entirely mine from first to last; you behaved more honourably than I believe any other woman would have done under the

circumstances. Cheer up, and do not take it so much to heart—but let us see what is best to be done about him.’

‘I felt so wicked, you know,’ Theo goes on, wiping her eyes with Loÿs’s handkerchief, with which he has been vainly endeavouring for the last two minutes to stem the torrent of her tears—‘quite like a murderer, or—or a garrotter, or something—I felt I had no right to be as happy as I was, and there has been a heavy load upon my conscience ever since. Will you not tell me what I had better do, Loÿs?’

‘You shall do whatever your own heart advises,’ Berresford answers, changing the careless provoking tone he had first used for one of quiet interest. ‘You will not be very far wrong, I fancy, if you follow its dictation.’

‘Well, I think,’ Theo says, ‘if you were to find out his chambers, and drive me there to-morrow, about noon, I should like to see him alone for a little while, to make my peace, and persuade him to think less hardly of me. You could go on to your club, you know, dearest, and send back the carriage for me in about an hour, as I am sure by that time I could make him feel better about it. Will you do all this for me, Loÿs?’

‘Of course I will, child—this, or anything else you like,’ he answers heartily. ‘I know his chambers well, so I can drive you there myself to-morrow, about two, when you can make your peace with him to your heart’s content; and I know this, that if my beautiful saint fails in comforting him, nothing in this world will do him much good. There—after that pretty compliment you ought to feel considerably better; so we won’t cry any more, and spoil our pretty eyes, will we? You shall say everything you please to satisfy him, and make the poor victim more hopelessly in love with you than ever—which is generally the result with regard to this style of thing, is it not? In fact, you shall do everything you like but kiss him; and I swear, if you do that, I shall get a divorce.’

‘Don’t, Loÿs,’ she says, laughing hysterically in spite of herself—‘how can you?’ Then, putting her arms around his neck again, and giving him a grateful hug, she continues, ‘You are the best of darlings—a dear, kind love; and I can never thank you enough.’ After which little ebullition she has just time to subside, when the servant enters with tea.

So the next morning, true to his word, Berresford takes his wife to Claude Ruthyn’s chambers, beguiling the way thither by informing her that, in his opinion, she is a woman possessed of considerable pluck to trust herself alone with him

at all, taking into consideration the circumstances of the case, as it is highly probable Ruthyn will murder her in cold blood on account of her former conduct, and advising her strongly to hire half a dozen of the force to listen outside the door for the first sounds of assault and battery.

With such useful conversation—indulged in for the express purpose of raising his wife's spirits, which have sunk to zero—he whiles away the time until the carriage draws up to allow Lady Berresford to alight at the desired quarter, when he leaves her with the parting injunction 'to be sure and take up a good position near the poker, as she will not be ruled by him and employ the police'; which latter piece of advice falls unnoticed upon Theo's ears, as with a beating heart she ascends the staircase, and is shown into a spacious room, where, amidst a pile of papers, sits her former lover busily writing.

As the door closes behind her with an uncompromising bang, poor Theo gives herself up for lost—feeling not quite certain whether she is going to cry or faint—but, gathering up her courage with a strong effort, like the brave little woman she is, she looks up imploringly, and so meets Claude Ruthyn's gaze.

He has risen, and is standing at a few yards' distance from her, looking pale and worn, but rather handsomer than ever, his breath coming short and quick as he sees before him the woman on whom he has lavished all the treasures of his warm heart, and who in return so shamefully wronged him.

'Theo—Lady Berresford!' he says, with a mad attempt to control his emotion—which attempt only terminates in a signal failure, because, seeing once more before him the small patrician face, with the rare sweet beauty he has loved so well, all the courage of his manhood forsakes him, and, flinging himself back into the chair from which he has just risen, he buries his face on his arms, and sobs such bitter, hopeless, despairing sobs as Theo prays she may never hear again.

'Claude! Claude!' Theo cries hurriedly, running over and kneeling down beside him, while, with true womanly tenderness, she strives to check the passion of his grief—'Claude, listen to me—pray listen to me.'

After which she pleads in the old sweet voice—so well remembered—for forgiveness, explaining little, and proving less, but womanlike, exhibiting her own conduct in perhaps a

rather sinful but wholly pitiable light. He takes no notice of her, however, either by word or look, and presently, in the very midst of one of her prettiest pieces of eloquence, pushes back his chair abruptly, with an impatient gesture, and, rising, walks over to one of the windows, taking up his position there, as though unwilling to turn and confront the woman before whom he has just now so cruelly humiliated himself.

Theo meanwhile stands where he has left her, in the centre of the room, timidly, with nervous fingers, fidgeting with her pearl-grey gloves, and wishing—oh so earnestly!—in her heart of hearts that she were back once more in her cosy boudoir, far away from this man whom she has so fatally injured, and who is now stationed with his back towards her in such an unceremonious attitude. She has arrived so far in her unpleasant cogitations, when the object of her thoughts, turning suddenly, says, in a voice so cold, so clear and stern as almost to make Theo believe that his last few minutes of self-abandonment had never been—

‘May I ask what has brought you here to-day?’

‘I am sure I don’t know,’ Theo answers dejectedly, beginning to feel decidedly small. ‘I wish I did know. I suppose I was foolish enough to imagine I could do some good; but unhappily it did not occur to me that the only feeling you could possibly entertain for me now must be hatred, after all that has passed. I suppose I also fancied that my coming here to-day to confess myself in the wrong would be some slight reparation for all the pain I have caused you. I see now that I have made a mistake.’

‘Reparation!’ he repeats with contemptuous scorn. ‘And do you imagine for a moment that the mere fact of your presence in this room can compensate me for the blighting of my whole life? You must think reparation a very easy matter.’

‘No, I do not think it easy—you mistake me,’ she explains hurriedly. ‘I know I have done you the greatest wrong a woman can do a man—a wrong that the sacrifice of my whole existence could scarcely atone for; but—but, for the sake of the old Theo whom you once loved, Claude, be friends with me,’ moving a few steps nearer and holding out her hands entreatingly.

‘Friends,’ he says, bitterly, taking no notice of her little outstretched fingers beyond stepping backwards and folding his arms doggedly—‘I fail to understand the meaning of that

term when applied to you and me. I am Claude Ruthyn, and you are Lady Berresford; while the Theo Blake whom I once knew and—loved has been dead and buried for many a day.'

'Then you will not accept my friendship?' she says, still humbly, although her pretty hands are tingling at the remembrance of how slightly their offer of peace has been refused. 'I suppose I ought to expect no kinder answer; but yet I think——'

'I think you have strangely forgotten yourself in coming here at all to day,' he interrupts her, sternly. 'Had I only known of your intention, I would never have seen you; and I am sorry that on my account you should have put yourself to so much inconvenience. Besides, this is no place for you—shall I order your carriage?'

'So you turn me out!' she says, proudly, turning slowly away, while her pale face flushes crimson at the indignity, and the conviction dawns upon her of how ignominious her defeat has been. 'I confess I hardly expected that. I am afraid, however, I must trespass on your time a little, as my carriage will not be here for twenty minutes; or will you order me a cab?'

'No, no!' he exclaims, hastily, shocked at his seeming rudeness and the interpretation she has put upon his words; 'you know I did not mean that. This room, with everything in it, is quite at your service as long as you wish to remain. You must be very cold; do let me persuade you to come over to the fire, and sit here until your carriage arrives,' wheeling on to the hearthrug, as he speaks, a comfortable arm-chair, in which she seats herself silently, without further comment.

He stirs the coals until they blaze and crackle with unwonted gaiety, after which he goes back to the pile of papers from which he had risen on her first appearance, and begins to write with extreme and businesslike rapidity, his pen creating a faint, irritating noise through the dreary silence of the room, as it moves with eager speed across the parchment; but, for all that, somehow his writing for the next five minutes does him small good hereafter, either in or out of his profession.

Theo meanwhile sits quietly, with her elbow on her knee, her head resting on her hand, thinking vaguely and rather disconnectedly of many things. When will that carriage come? she wonders. How slow it is! Could Loïs have

forgotten? Ah, how changed Claude's manner is, and how kind he used to be! How can she ever summon up courage enough to tell Loÿs of the failure of this her favourite scheme? And finally she asks herself with painful nervousness, will Claude shake hands with her when she is bidding him farewell?

'Will you allow me to get you a glass of wine, Lady Berresford?' Ruthyn asks—he has come over from his papers unheard, and is standing close beside her.

'No, thank you,' she answers, with a perceptible start, though scarcely changing her position, merely turning her head towards him, so that her chin is resting on her hand, and thereby displaying to the best advantage—albeit most unconsciously—her beautiful sorrowing eyes, that shine up at him with misty lustre, though half drowned in unshed tears.

He goes back no more to his writing, but, turning towards the chimneypiece, rests his arm upon it, contemplating moodily the fitful fire that glows and sparkles beneath his gaze as though in mockery of his misery.

Good heavens! what a wretched, useless thing his life has seemed for the last six months—so dull, so spiritless! And here was she looking—oh, how beautiful—how sweet and happy! Yes; there can be little doubt about her happiness, he thinks: her very step and voice betoken the satisfied, contented woman; while he—oh, if things could but be different—if Theo Berresford could only be Theo Ruthyn instead of what she now is—how calm and tranquil and rose-tinged all his years might be! Then he falls to fancying the little figure, seated so silently in the large arm-chair before him, his own in reality—his wife—the being whom on earth he worships most fondly, and tries to imagine she has come here this evening to take him back to their happy home, and charm him away from his deeds and parchments with the old coaxing ways he used to love so well.

But all in vain he dreams; the sweet vision will not linger with him, fading away relentlessly into the present pain, while Elaine's tenderest of all tender moans comes home unbidden to his mind, and sings its little plaintive burden to his aching heart—

Sweet is true love though given in vain—in vain;
And sweet is death that puts an end to pain;
I know not which is sweeter—no, not I.

Love, art thou sweet? Then bitter death must be.
Love thou art bitter—sweet is death to me;
Oh, love, if death be sweeter, let me die!

With a muttered exclamation he rouses himself impatiently from this dismal train of thought, and, changing his position slightly, so that his gaze falls upon Theo this time instead of the mocking fire, contemplates her attentively.

The room they are in is large and handsome and luxuriously furnished, but 'the day is cold and dark and dreary,' so that there is very little light to enliven the dulness of their thoughts beyond the restless tongues of fire that every now and then flare up, making the 'darkness visible.'

Theo still sits in her old position, her chin resting on her small gloved hand, totally unconscious of Ruthyn's fixed contemplation. Her thoughts, like his, have roamed away into the dreamy past, and old memories of bygone times rise with bitter sweetness in her heart, blotting out completely for the moment all remembrance of her present living happiness. The last year dies away; Ruthyn, with his true warm affection, is once more her accepted lover, and so on, and on, and on, until she too awakes with a pang to the recollection of how cruelly he has been treated, and then two bright tears slowly detach themselves from her eyes, falling with a tiny splash upon her dress.

Claude's brow contracts with pain, and he moves uneasily; but, when two more tears gather, and, following their predecessors, find refuge also on the silken ground, he can stand it no longer, but, coming quickly forward, he seizes both her hands, saying huskily—

'Don't do that, Theo—do anything but that! I was unkind—brutal—to you a few minutes ago, I know; but I was out of my mind—maddened by seeing you unexpectedly after so long a time. I will say or do whatever you wish now, only never let me see you cry again. Oh, child, child, what spirit of evil induced you to come here at all to-day?'

'Not a spirit of evil—a good spirit. I could not bear to see you looking as you looked yesterday,' she says, hanging her head sorrowfully with the old childish grace of manner full upon her; 'and—and—I fancied if I came you might learn to hate me less.'

'If it will be the slightest consolation or comfort to you,' he returns, after a troubled pause, 'you may believe me when I say that I never have hated and never can hate you.'

‘Then why not forgive and be friends with me?’ she asks, pleadingly.

‘I do forgive you with all my heart and soul: but, as to being friends—oh, Theo.’ he breaks out passionately, ‘do you know what to be a friend means? And do you think me a dog, or a stone, that, with all my old love still fall upon me, I could see you day after day the wife of another man and endure the pain? I could not—it is too much to expect of me.’

‘And you prefer sitting here in solitude nursing this fancy?’ cries she eagerly. ‘Ah, believe me, that is no way to get over it. Listen to me, Claude: if you just once made up your mind to see much of me and study my character closely—without the former blindness—you would soon discover so many faults and shortcomings in it that you would be disenchanted in no time. Why, there are hundreds of girls in this very London ten times prettier and sweeter, and far, far more worthy of you than I could ever have been, whom I feel certain you would like if you would only try to shake off this foolish misanthropic feeling you have encouraged lately, and mix with them. After seeing them you would soon forget me, and learn to be happy.’

‘Should I?’ with a half-smile: I hardly think so. Your advice might be very excellent for some men, but it scarcely suits me. You see, Theo, when a man of my habits—who has spent all the earlier years of his life in hard study—falls in love, his case is generally very hopeless indeed.’

‘But it would not be hopeless if you only tried to overcome it,’ Lady Berresford argues persistently, and ceased to consider me the most perfect creature upon earth. Come now,’ coaxingly, ‘I am going to give a ball on the eighteenth, and before I go you will promise to come to it, will you not?’ Ah, no,’ seeing he is about to refuse, ‘you will not disappoint me in this—you will not send me away feeling that my visit has done no good?’ and as she pleads the tears he dreads so much rise once more from the depths of her loving heart.

Theo,’ he says, distractedly, seeing them glistening in the sweet grey eyes, and beginning to think himself a hardened brute, ‘do not look so miserable. I will go—I will do anything you ask me, rather than be the cause of a moment’s grief to you.

‘Ah, now I believe you are indeed friends with me,’ she says, with a happy smile: and just at this stage of the pro-

ceedings a servant opens the door, and announces that 'her ladyship's carriage is waiting for her.'

'Very good,' Theo answers, rising as she speaks, and looking up at Ruthyn. 'I have your promise, remember; and I shall send you a card for the eighteenth. Claude, you have made me far happier in my mind than I at all deserve—I know that. And now will you shake hands with me? You would not, you know, when first I came in'—holding out her hand to him, with a charming smile.

'Would I not?' he asks, with an answering smile, retaining her hand, but flushing a little as he speaks. 'I was mad, I think. Still, I can never thank you sufficiently for coming here, as your very presence has done me more good than I can tell you.'

'And I am quite forgiven?' Theo asks.

'Yes, you are quite forgiven,' he answers, stooping to impress two kisses on the little hand still lying in his own; after which he takes her downstairs, and puts her into the carriage very carefully and gratefully. Then, giving the word to the coachman, he returns to his lonely chambers, if a sad, still a younger and happier man than he has been for many a month.

CHAPTER XI.

THAT evening, as Lady Berresford is dressing for dinner, her husband knocks at her bedroom door; and, as she murmurs 'Come in' in her pretty clear voice, he enters eagerly, looking very handsome and provoking, as he exclaims, with a deep sigh of pretended relief—

'So you are safe. Well, you cannot think what a comfort your voice was to me; I really quite feared to knock, lest I might receive no answer, as I should then have understood at once that you were numbered with the dead. So he let you off? Well, I am astonished at his clemency; or perhaps you took my advice, and brained him with the poker—eh? Which was it? Tell me, though, seriously—how did it go off?'

'Beautifully,' declares Theo, with enthusiasm. She is standing on the hearth-rug opposite the fire, in a white covering of some sort, with her fair brown hair all down, and

is looking the very picture of loveliness. 'That is, rather badly in the beginning, you know, but perfectly in the end. And what do you think, Loÿs? He has actually consented to come to our ball on the eighteenth!'

'He *has*!' says Berresford, feeling slightly disconcerted at this latter intelligence. 'Well, now that you have arranged all your own programme, perhaps your royal highness will be kind enough to explain mine.'

'Oh, you—you must receive him rather cordially, you know—not too coldly, and not too warmly, that is; and then leave the rest to me. Poor fellow, he was dreadfully upset when first I entered, so much so, indeed, that I began to feel quite miserable.'

'Quite like a murderer or—or a garrotter,' puts in Loÿs, imitating her manner of the night before. 'Well, as he has not slain you outright, I owe him a debt of gratitude; I never expected to see you alive again. He behaved uncommonly creditably.'

'Yes, he was quite tame,' Theo says; then, mischievously, 'but you forgot to ask me one thing, Loÿs. You forgot to ask if he kissed me. And he did—there!'

'Kissed you!' echoes Loÿs.

'Yes, kissed me, not only once, but twice, and without permission, too,' with a merry, ringing laugh.

'And have you the audacity, you disgraceful young person,' says Loÿs, 'to stand there boldly, before your injured husband, and confess to such a crime? Well, you know the consequences: I shall immediately procure a divorce, if there be justice in this land.'

'Do,' merrily; 'you cannot think what a relief it will be to my wounded feelings—only—only I am afraid you will not gain your point, as it was merely my hand he kissed.'

'Ah, was that all?' in a disappointed tone.

'We must get all the prettiest girls we can muster for our ball,' Lady Berresford says presently. 'I think Kate Blount would be the very girl for him, would she not?'

'Can't say I am sure,' Berresford answers; 'ask her. I have not the remotest idea on the subject, and can only say I pity him if he has fallen into your match-making hands.'

'Ah, but I am in earnest, Loÿs, his wife says eagerly, putting her hand through his arm, and glancing up into his face with sweet, shy grace; I want very much to marry him to some really charming girl, whom he can love, and who

would make him happy, because, you know, darling, he loved me once, and he is very lonely now.'

'Poor fellow !' Loÿs murmurs, almost remorsefully, kissing tenderly the precious upturned face, and comprehending thoroughly now—for perhaps the first time—what an irreparable injury he has done Claude Ruthyn.

ERIC DERING.

‘A man I am, cross’d with adversity.’

—*Two Gentlemen of Verona*

‘So it is all settled at last—quite over—and I have actually fallen into my proper position as drawing-master, without in any way seriously damaging my constitution!’ exclaimed Eric Dering, half mockingly, as, on a bright warm summer afternoon, he lounged up and down the tiny morning-room of one of the tiniest cottages in Christendom. ‘I think, on the strength of this new opening in my life, I will give myself a whole holiday from the easel this morning—eh, Georgie? Are you asleep, child? Or what are you thinking about so silently?’—turning as he finished his sentence towards a distant corner of the room where Georgie, the individual addressed, had been maintaining an unbroken silence for the last few minutes.

At these words, however, she rose hastily, and, throwing down her work with an impatient gesture, moved across the room to where her brother was standing at the open window, contemplating dreamily the peaceful beauty of the landscape, and plucking to pieces recklessly the soft pink roses that, creeping round the casement, framed his figure.

‘I was thinking, dearest,’ she said, with extreme tenderness, laying her hand upon his arm—and a very gentle, fair little hand it was—‘what a brave old fellow you are, and how nobly you have borne the reverses of our fortune. Oh, Eric, are you to have all the work while I sit idly by, doing nothing to assist you? The idea makes me miserable. Is there no way in which I can prove myself of some use?’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, child,’ he answered lightly, taking the hand that rested on his arm, and holding it lovingly between his own; ‘do you think I would allow you to work these pretty fingers to the bone, or ruffle your poor little brow

with overmuch thought, for the sake of what you could earn? No, I will work for us both. And I tell you I will woo fortune and win her too, in the long run, in spite of all obstacles, and without the assistance of any man. So cheer up, Georgie, and do not look so downhearted, darling, but help me to forget the wealth that should, I know, in common fairness have been mine, and let us instead dream of the time to come, when your brother will be an "eminent artist," and you will be hesitating in your own mind as to whether you will bestow yourself upon a duke or a marquis.'

To this half-jesting, half-confident speech the girl made no reply beyond raising his hand and pressing it tenderly to her cheek, while the sweet June sunshine came down to drown her in its warm embrace, transforming her rippling chestnut hair into threads of living gold.

Eric and Georgie Dering were orphans, their father and mother having been carried off by one of India's fatal fevers when they were both almost in their infancy, leaving the children in trust to Captain Dering's half-brother, Eustace Morgan. To more unwilling hands they could scarcely have been confided, Eustace Morgan being, from long and close study, a confirmed bookworm, of a stern and selfish temperament, a man who abhorred all change in the measured routine of his loveless life, and who received the little pale India-bred children, if not exactly grudgingly, at least without a particle of natural affection.

Very little of life's sunshine fell upon the lonely creatures throughout their desolate childhood, with no playmates to raise a smile upon their too thoughtful faces, no mother's voice to soothe the innumerable trials of infancy. They were very quiet in those days, with a sad quietness pitiable to behold in beings so young, their chief amusement being to wander hand in hand, with hushed footsteps, through the ghostly dim old halls, past wild beasts stuffed and marble statues, up the grand oak staircase, and into the picture-gallery, where spruce cavaliers and grim armoured knights looked down from their gilded frames upon the handsome children beneath them, who, with tightly-clasped fingers and admiration mingled with awe, surveyed in silence the ancient ancestors who stared at them so sternly in return.

Miss Dering—the old man had commanded—was to receive as good an education as governesses and masters were capable of bestowing, while the boy, who was at least six years older

than his fair-haired little sister, was to be coached and drilled and lectured by teachers and pastors into that fitting state of enlightenment which should enable the heir of Branksmere to sit with dignity in the seat of his forefathers.

As such he was regarded by all the country round—by the servants and tutors, and those few residents who on Sundays after church, in the ancient village porch, stopped to ask the ‘odd little strangers’ all sorts of questions about themselves and their occupations. The old Squire himself had frequently dropped hints to the same effect, as, for instance, when one evening, on some wonderful occasion, the children had been marshalled down with great pomp to attend the nine o’clock dessert—at any of which state entertainments the grey-haired butler paid the youngsters great honour, helping them to all sorts of things that were decidedly bad for them—the boy had asked his uncle, with pardonable curiosity, ‘Uncle Eustace, whose is that picture over the chimney-piece?’ and the Squire, having roused himself with difficulty from the solving of one of his beloved problems, had answered kindly enough, ‘Your great-grandmother; I keep her here on account of the perfect beauty of the painting; but, when you bring home a bride, Eric, you must place her picture in the gallery upstairs, as all the masters of Branksmere have done before you.’

So also, a few years later, when the boy—who had grown into a tall, handsome, shapely lad—had returned home from Eton for his holidays, and been taken to the study that his uncle might see how manly he had grown, and mark the bright fire of intellect that sparkled in his soft brown eyes, the old man, as though struck by the youth’s sudden springing into manhood, had placed his hand upon his shoulder, not affectionately, but with the cold courtesy habitual to him, and drawing him to the window, had pointed eastward to where some giant trees were growing straight and grand.

‘You will remember, Eric,’ he said, ‘when I am gone, that those elms must never know the touch of steel. It is my one request of you; I beg you to spare them, no matter what other wood you cut and hew and carve.’ And the boy answered, ‘Yes, uncle, I will remember,’ while he wondered vaguely in his own mind what there could be in the stately row of elms to raise so much sentiment in the frozen breast of Eustace Morgan.

When Eric had reached his twentieth year, his uncle decided that he should travel; so, bidding a lingering adieu to

the blue-eyed little girl who clung so despairingly to his neck, he set out on his voyage of discovery to many lands, learning numerous things that had better have been left unlearned, and taking to heart others that it was well a man should know. In this wise -- seeing the base and noble, the wicked and blessed actions of life—he journeyed on, until, arriving in Italy, all the wild genius hitherto smouldering in his breast broke loose, and the young man swore to his own heart that he would make a name for himself or die.

Painting was his ambition. What were all the gold and lands upon earth in comparison with seeing a face grow beneath his hand which should force the world in after time to confess that ‘it was good’? So arguing, he gave his whole soul to his art, working and slaving and toiling from ‘dawn to dewy eve’ at his beloved occupation, scarcely allowing himself time to scribble off now and then short expressive letters telling of his successes and failures, his happiness and wild longing for fame to the lonely little child who had grown in his four years’ absence into a very beautiful girl of eighteen. In this manner the days passed smoothly enough, until one morning he received a letter from the old family lawyer, Mr. Tophthorne, announcing his uncle’s death, and his—Mr. Tophthorne s—great anxiety to have him back in England once more.

The news shocked him greatly, as it was only natural it should, although no great love had ever existed between him and the one now gone; and, packing up his latest painting carefully, he bade a tender farewell to his beautiful dark-eyed model, and travelled post-haste to England, arriving at Brankmere one magnificent evening towards the close of May, only to hear that his uncle had died suddenly, intestate, whereby all the property went to an elder nephew surnamed Morgan, and he and his delicate sister were left totally unprovided for. It was news to make a sterner check than his grow pale and meeker eyes flash angrily; but, with his elbow resting on the chimney-piece in the library, and his face half shaded by his hand, the only expression of reproach Eric Dering bestowed upon the memory of the dead was—‘I wish, Tophthorne, he had given me a profession;’ to which slight expression of resentment poor little Mr. Tophthorne, who had broken the bad tidings very gently to the young man he had known from boyhood, had answered pityingly, ‘I wish to Heaven he had.’

As for Georgie, the child shed far more bitter tears on her brother's account than ever dimmed her blue eyes on her own. 'My poor darling,' she had sobbed, throwing her arms around him, 'it is too hard for you—too hard;' and somehow, though he had made no reply beyond kissing her, Eric at that moment felt that the night was not indeed all darkness while those clinging tender arms were still left to him.

The new heir, a man of immense property, was on the Continent, and had written home orders that the house and all in it should be quite at young Dering's disposal so long as it would suit him to remain; but for all that Eric could not bring himself to stay longer than was strictly necessary, as a visitor, in a place where he had been accustomed to the homage due to a future master; so, having secured a tiny cottage somewhere in the adjoining county, he and his sister looked their last one morning on the green fields and wooded park of Branksmere, and passed out together into the cold pitiless world. They had been three days in their new abode, and Eric had at length succeeded in getting a pupil, to help on the weary round of life until his merit as an artist should be acknowledged, and he should wake some morning to find himself famous. Evening was come, and Georgie Dering, watering-pot in hand, stood in the centre of the square little garden that ornamented the front of their fairy-like dwelling, busily tending her flowers, while Eric lounged at a slight distance from her, smoking and watching.

'You have not told me about your pupil, Eric,' his sister said presently, stooping to pluck off a crumpled rose-leaf as she spoke—'the young lady who is to lay the foundation-stone of your future fortune, you know.'

'Haven't I?' lazily, removing his pipe. 'Well, I will make up for my remissness now. Miss Janet Harcourt is a pale little child of about fourteen, with a decided talent for painting, who will astonish the weak nerves of the artistic world some of these days, or I'm a Dutchman. Then there is Sir John Harcourt, who may be satisfactorily described as a "gentleman of the old school"—which must have been a very extensive and peculiar institution by the way—and finally there is Miss Harcourt, who is considered a beauty.'

'Miss Harcourt!' Georgie repeated curiously. 'I had no idea there was another girl. How old is she, Eric?'

'About two years older than you—twenty-one, I should say.'

'Twenty-one,' Georgie murmured thoughtfully; 'and very nice, I think you said, Eric?'

'No. I don't think I said that. Eric answered coolly, knocking the ashes out of his meerschaum as he spoke. 'I do not believe that expression would suit Miss Harcourt by any means. On the contrary, she seems cold and hard and haughty, while, from her manner, I should say that she holds drawing-masters in very low esteem indeed.'

'Eric!' cried his sister passionately, dropping the unoffending watering-pot, and running over to his side, while her pretty lips quivered with suppressed pain and rage, 'she did not dare—'

'Now, Georgie,' the young man chided, taking her face between his hands, and forcing her to meet his eyes, 'how am I ever to persuade your obstinate little mind to understand this—that Eric Dering, heir to eight thousand a year, and Eric Dering, heir to a drawing-master's salary, are two very different beings? Listen to me attentively, and do not mistake things, while I tell you all that happened, which is not much. Miss Janet Harcourt and I were getting on very nicely with our first lesson this morning, when the door opened and a young lady entered the room; whereupon my pupil introduced me to her sister, Miss Harcourt, who looked me all over superciliously for a moment before she condescended to bestow upon me the very haughtiest inclination of her exceedingly haughty little head, looking as cold and disagreeable and insolent the entire time as a young lady could well look. Not being perfectly broken in to my new position just yet, I am afraid I was absurd enough to feel angry, and put on my most unpleasant expression until she rustled out of the room again, which she did in a moment or so after she had delivered a message to her sister, when I once more subsided into my usual state of amiability. This is a full, true, and particular account of the day's doings, so I hope you are satisfied, little one, that Miss Harcourt neither boxed my ears nor otherwise ill-treated me.'

'Cold and insolent,' Georgie repeated sorrowfully. 'And yet you said she was beautiful!'

'Considered beautiful,' the young man corrected, moving away abruptly. 'I see no beauty in her face.' Then, looking back with a light laugh, he quoted gaily, 'You know, Georgie—

"If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be?"

and certainly her conduct towards me was not fair this morning.'

After this he went straight into the house and up to his small studio, leaving Georgie standing in the warm June twilight to think of him, and resent his wrongs bitterly in her heart, while half her flowers waited anxiously for the cool grateful water that never came—on that night at least—to bathe their longing faces.

'Papa,' cried Janet Harcourt eagerly, about a fortnight later, as Sir John put his head inside his eldest daughter's room to deliver a letter he had received for her. 'stay a moment—I want to speak to you'—running over and seizing him by the coat to compel him to remain. 'I saw Mr. Dering's sister in church yesterday, and I want to know her; she is so lovely. May I go and call on her? I know I shall like her awfully.'

'Like her awfully,' repeated the Baronet laughing, 'and you have never yet spoken one word to her! Chris, why do you not give this foolish child some of your sense? Yes, my pet, you may go and see her as soon as you like;' saying which, Sir John retreated hastily to get himself ready for dinner.

'There, that is settled!' exclaimed Miss Janet decidedly. 'And you will come with me to-morrow—eh, Chris?'

'Yes,' answered Chris, dreamily.

'Do you know what I think?' continued the child, speaking with confidential slowness. 'I think Mr. Dering is a gentleman; and I think also that both he and his pretty sister were rich once, but that some bad man came and ran away with all their money. I cannot tell you why I think this, but I feel sure of it.'

'Are you quite sure of it?' her sister asked with a half-laugh. 'What a little wiseacre you are!'

'Yes, I dare say I am a wiseacre,' the little one went on, more earnestly still, 'because I can see many things that other people cannot see—Chris'—breaking off abruptly and going over to Miss Harcourt's side, where she knelt down at her feet and laid her bare white arms on her lap—'why don't you like Mr. Dering?'

'Why don't I like him?' echoed Christine, gazing with wonder upon the small face uplifted to her own. 'Who told you I did not like him, Janet?'

'Yourself—your own manner,' said the child softly.

'Oh, Chris, you who are so sweet and charming in your manner to everyone else, why are you so hard and unkind to him? I am very sorry about it because I like him myself so much—and I cannot bear that he should not admire you.'

'And does he not?' Miss Harcourt inquired curiously, an odd undefinable expression creeping over her face.

'Well, I'll tell you,' her sister began importantly. 'Yesterday I said to him, after you had left the room—and I think you were especially nasty to him, Chris—"Is not my sister Chris a beautiful darling, Mr. Dering?" and he answered, almost slightly, "She has very perfect features." "But do you not admire her?" I said again, because I was dying to know, and he replied, quite coldly, "I always find it difficult to admire a hard face." So you see it is all your own fault, Christine—and he said all that, I assure you.'

'Did he?' was all Miss Harcourt answered, quietly, but she raised her little sister's arms gently from her knees and went over to the open window, where she stood very silently for a long time with her back to the child. Outside, under her eyes, the perfumed flowers were nodding their heads lazily in the rays of the warm dying sun, while a large blue-and-white butterfly swept slowly across her face, and a heavy brown luxurious old bee tumbled with a contented buzz into a tulip-bell hard by.

But, when the next morning came, Janet discovered that after all she must needs pay her visit by herself, Christine being troubled with a very severe headache, she said, which somehow showed itself neither in look, manner, nor speech, as her eyes were quite as bright as usual, and her voice as clear. Nothing daunted, however, Janet ordered her pony, and rode off triumphantly to take Miss Dering's heart 'by storm,' as she said with a gay laugh when mounting—which boast she most certainly fulfilled long before the interview was half ended, captivating Georgie's affections by her easy childish grace and expressive face. She praised the flowers, the lazy old tabby cat, and even Miss Dering's blue eyes, with that ring of genuine feeling in her voice that makes all praise so sweet, and finally, catching sight of Eric ready to set out for the Hall, to give her her morning lesson, she called out to him to wait for her, and she would ride back her pony very slowly with him for company.

Arrived at the Hall, Eric and his young charge found Christine in the schoolroom before them—an apartment so

called, although it was the girls' favourite resort, and the cosiest little room in all the house—looking as lovely as though headaches and heartaches were things unknown. She had never been accustomed to do more than bow to Eric, but on this day—prompted by either feeling or caprice—she extended her hand to him. She did it haughtily enough, scarcely raising her eyes to his while doing it, but Janet was pleased with the action, and looked so, while Eric bit his lip fiercely, and barely touched the hand she offered.

'You have had a warm ride,' Christine said, passing her hand very sweetly and lovingly, Eric saw with surprise, across her sister's forehead. He was watching her, now that she could not perceive him, and he discovered, to his still greater astonishment, that her large proud eyes could soften more than he would have believed possible some time since, while her voice came clearly and fondly—'I hope you told Miss Dering that it was a very severe headache alone prevented my accompanying you to-day?'

'Yes, I told her,' Janet replied. 'I hope that it is better now, my poor Christie, and that you will be quite well for dinner. Oh, you have on your lovely brooch! See, Mr. Dering, isn't it the very prettiest thing you have ever seen?'

'It is handsome,' Eric answered carelessly, glancing at it critically as he spoke, 'but not the very prettiest thing I have ever seen;' and involuntarily as he said the words he raised his eyes to the beautiful face above it. A minute afterwards he could have hated himself for the sentence, because, meeting Miss Harcourt's glance, he discovered, by the vivid crimson blush that overspread her features, how entirely she had appropriated the little speech to herself. He was provoked and annoyed more than he would have chosen to confess, and immediately informed Miss Janet, with exemplary coldness, that jewellery of any sort found no favour in his sight, and that the very loveliest thing he had ever seen was a little peasant-girl in Italy dressed in fantastic rags, who wore her hair down to her heels, and sold flowers.

'When you have finished your drawing, and Mr. Dering has confided to you all his Italian reminiscences, will you come with me to the orchard, Janet?' Miss Harcourt broke in languidly.

'She can join you this moment,' said Dering. 'She cannot go on with her study this morning—her hands shake so from the intense heat. Good-bye, Miss Janet—I will finish

my foreign revelations another time; and promise me not to meddle with your paints any more to-day, but give yourself a whole holiday.'

'I promise. Good-bye,' little Janet said sweetly, giving him her hand; 'and tell your sister I will call very soon again to see her.'

'I shall remember,' Eric answered. 'Good-morning, Miss Harcourt;' and he gave the latter no opportunity of repeating her unusual piece of morning friendliness—namely, shaking hands with him—by bowing distantly, and disappearing through the low French window, his favourite mode of exit after the daily lesson. 'Good Heavens,' he thought, as he strode rapidly across the park, under the shade of the grand old oaks and spreading beeches that effectually shielded him from the glare of the noonday sun, 'what a face that girl has! What an amount of pride, *hauteur*, and sweetness condensed into one small space! How beautiful she is—how gracious to all around her—how loving to her little sister; while to me—— Oh, to be rich again, to be even with her for only one short half-hour—to compel her to smile—to speak to me as she smiles and speaks to others who are not fit to touch the hem of her garment! If I could hold her in my arms for one minute, and see that insolent, mocking, maddening face grow tender and loving under my gaze, I feel I could be content to go away for ever, and accept such a moment's bliss as my portion of happiness in this life. She blushed when I looked at her just now—blushed angrily because of my presumption, I suppose, in daring to consider her beauty. Pshaw! I am mad to think of her in this way, like a love-sick schoolboy. I have the prospect of fame before me; I have art for my mistress—with which I ought surely to be contented—and I will banish all other hopes from my heart.' But, for all that, and in spite of his courageous determination to think of her no more, he knew in his inmost soul that the perfect face of Christine Harcourt would haunt him till his death.

After this the days passed on monotonously enough, with nothing to vary the usual routine of daily life beyond a visit from the Hall to the cottage, or a return visit from the small dwelling to the large one. Sir John had been introduced, and had taken a wonderful fancy to pretty chestnut-haired Georgie Dering, persuading her to come up to the Hall as often as ever she could, and sending her down perpetually

large baskets of fruit and flowers from the gardens, he having taken it into his kind old head that she required such delicate things to keep up her fragile little frame. Christine herself had fallen in love with her after a few weeks' acquaintance, going to considerable trouble to gain the good graces of the sister while she still continued to ignore and depreciate the brother, much to Janet's discontent, who was at all times Eric's fast friend and ally. Her affection for Miss Dering however was, almost in spite of herself, warmly returned by Georgie, who informed her brother one evening that she was at a loss to understand his bad taste, as she considered Miss Harcourt 'very sweet and charming to speak to, and quite the loveliest girl she had ever seen,' whereupon Eric answered her that he supposed in that case she made a point of reserving all her disagreeable manners for his special edification; after which would-be indifferent speech he went away upstairs to his diminutive painting-room, to think of the girl who made herself so unlovable to him alone, and to gaze with vain yearnings on a certain picture he was painting, which picture strangely resembled the heiress of Harcourt Hall.

July was coming to a close, and all the air was heavy with the sweet breath of flowers, mingled with the perfume of the new-mown hay, when one morning Miss Harcourt and her sister arrived at the cottage, to find Georgie standing alone in the little garden, snipping, plucking, and in other ways tending her beloved plants.

'How pretty everything looks to-day!' Janet said presently, lazily pushing up her hat from her warm young brow. 'Even you are looking tolerably well this morning, Georgie.' At which piece of open impertinence they all laughed indolently.

'Come in, will you not, and sit down?' Georgie asked. 'You must feel dreadfully used up after your long walk. It is really more than good of you to come down and enliven my dulness this overpowering day. I don't know where Eric is, as I have not seen him since breakfast; but I dare say he is up in his "enchanted palace," as I call his painting-room—he is so wedded to it.'

'His painting-room?' cried Janet. 'Oh, Georgie, I would give my eyes to get into it! Would he let me go up, do you think, if I asked him?'

'Yes, he would,' answered Eric, with a laugh, appearing at the open window, having overheard Miss Janet's last

remark, 'even without demanding the eyes. How d'you do, Miss Harcourt? Warm day, isn't it?'

'Very,' Miss Harcourt answered absently.

'Very well, take me there now, as I am extremely anxious to see your picture-gallery,' said Janet, saucily. 'Are your hands all over paint that you keep them behind your back in that suspicious manner? I verily believe they are.' And she ran in through the open window, and round Eric, to try to get a peep at the hidden fingers.

'If you insult me any more I shall not admit you into my *sanctum sanctorum*,' Eric declared threateningly, retreating always as she came nearer, 'or else I shall shake hands with you, and utterly spoil those pretty gloves, which would be worse still; so take care.'

'Oh, well, a truce! I will be civil,' Miss Janet cried, feeling rather out of breath with her exertions, and slipping one hand through his arm. 'So do come now and show me all your wonderful things.'

'I suppose you would not care to come?' Eric said, pausing for a moment, and flushing slightly, as he looked straight at Miss Harcourt, expecting a cool refusal from her curved red lips. 'But——'

'Yes, I think I should like it very much, if you will invite me,' that young lady replied, with most unusual condescension; whereupon all four took their way upstairs to Eric's own apartment. Here they lingered about for the best part of an hour, Eric showing them all his choicest scraps and his most spirited sketches, to Janet's intense enjoyment, while Miss Harcourt made herself most particularly pleasant and agreeable, falling in love on the spot with a brilliantly-finished portrait of a beautiful Italian peasant. 'Is it the girl you were telling Janet about the other day?' she asked, glancing up at him rather coquettishly from under her white straw hat, and blushing faintly while he answered 'No' very absently. How little she thought how infinitely superior to him seemed the living face before his eyes to all the Italian flower-girls ever painted!

Meanwhile Georgie had gone downstairs again to get them some fruit and wine after their long walk, leaving Janet to her own devices, which at this particular juncture meant prowling into all sorts of obscure corners and bringing to light such half-finished difficult subjects as Eric had put away for future consideration. She had not, however, been very

long so employed, when an exclamation that fell involuntarily from her lips caused the other two to turn hastily, and inquire the cause. But small need was there, when they had turned, to ask any questions, as before them on the table, in the very centre of the room, unveiled by Janet's hand, lay disclosed to Christine Harcourt's gaze a perfect picture of her own exquisite face. As they both stood spell-bound—one of them unable to speak from astonishment—the child raised her eyes, and, seeing the storm gathering on Eric's brow, together with the angry flush upon her sister's, she rightly guessed in a moment that it was her last act which had been the cause of both, and so, wisely coming to the conclusion that in this instance at least 'discretion' would be the 'better part of valour,' she fled from the apartment precipitately, leaving Christine Harcourt and Eric Dering gazing with very different feelings upon the luckless painting.

When she was gone, the young man strode forward hurriedly, and would have again replaced its usual covering, but Miss Harcourt prevented him by laying her hand upon his arm. 'Let me see this picture, please,' she said; and he, stepping back, she contemplated long and earnestly her own charming image, which looked at her from the frame with liquid hazel eyes, after which she turned silently, without a word, to leave the room. Eric, however, seeing her intention, placed himself determinedly before her, so barring her exit and forcing her to meet his gaze.

'Miss Harcourt,' he began hastily, 'do not judge me too harshly in this matter, I implore you, though all I can say in my own defence is that I could not help it. Day by day and night by night your face was before me, haunting both my waking and sleeping hours, until it became a necessity that I should place it in some tangible form before my sight. Do not turn so coldly from me—do not think——'

'I think only one thing,' Miss Harcourt said very coldly, but with bitter emphasis—'that day by day you have taken advantage of my society to paint and hold in your possession, without my permission, what you know well I should never have given you for the asking—never! And I think also that in so doing you have acted like a coward.' Her face, when she had finished, was as white as snow, but for all that she looked steadily and defiantly into Eric's eyes, who returned the gaze as steadily.

'You shall never say that to me again!' he said, after a

few moments' pause, during which his heart had throbbed painfully with the intensity of his grief and the knowledge of how shamefully she wronged him in her thoughts; and then, walking calmly to the table where the picture lay, he deliberately opened his penknife and cut the beautiful features into tiny shreds, even while the beloved eyes smiled up reproachfully into his. After this he flung the mutilated fragments into the empty fire-place, and then turned to open the door for Miss Harcourt.

The whole scene occupied but a few minutes, and Christine, after the first involuntary movement to stay the cruel hand, had watched the work of destruction from beginning to end in utter silence. But when all was ended, and the brilliant laughing face that an instant before had been so charming a picture lay a confused mass in the cold grate—while Eric stepped so callously, as it seemed, towards the door—Miss Harcourt's highly-strung nerves gave way, and she burst into a sudden storm of tears, quick as a summer shower, and almost as violent, which, while it lasted, shook heavily her delicate frame.

'Miss Harcourt—Christine darling—don't cry!' Eric exclaimed passionately, going hastily to her side and forgetting in his agony all knowledge of his words. 'Why will you think so much of this unfortunate occurrence? See—I have ruined the picture for ever—destroyed the one possession that was to me the most precious thing on earth—and I swear to you never again to paint such another! Am I not then sufficiently punished, without knowing also that it is my folly which has caused you these tears?'

'I am not thinking about the picture,' the girl answered, turning away from him towards the window, where she laid her burning forehead against the cool shining glass; and it was many a long day afterwards before she told him why she had shed those bitter heartfelt tears.

That night, with his elbow resting on the table, and his face half hidden from the glare of the brilliant lamp, Eric Dering told his sister a short but sorrowful story that saddened her loving heart not a little. He told her of his passionate unchangeable love for beautiful Christine Harcourt, also how utterly hopeless he felt that love to be, and how impossible he found it to remain longer near her without betraying himself. It seemed selfish, he said, to tear her away from

the pretty cottage she had learned to love so dearly, but he knew well that nothing would tempt her to forsake him, so they would go away together to the North of England, where he would devote himself to his art, and school his thoughts to forget this first and, as he devoutly hoped, last love of his heart.

Georgie listened silently, from the quiet commencement to the more vehement end, without in any way interrupting his confession, beyond slipping her gentle little fingers into his with true womanly sympathy. When he had completely finished, she tightened her grasp, and whispered kindly—

‘And she, Eric—are you quite sure that she does not love you?’

‘Quite sure,’ Eric answered calmly, but with intense bitterness, thinking of the morning’s scene in the studio; ‘and, even if she did, what difference could it make to me? By what right could I, in my present position, even dream of the heiress of Harcourt Hall?’

‘Then we will go,’ Georgie decided tenderly, in her pretty low soothing voice; and so the discussion ended.

About a week later Miss Harcourt was busy in her conservatory, pointing out some alterations to be effected by her head-gardener, when a quick footstep, coming towards her from the drawing-room, caused her to turn abruptly and encounter the well-known features of Eric Dering. They had never met since that last memorable occasion in Eric’s painting-room, and the girl’s face flamed warmly now as she extended her hand in greeting.

‘I am come to bid you good-bye,’ the young man said, without a word of preface.

‘To bid me good-bye?’ Christine repeated vaguely, as though failing to take in the real meaning of his words. ‘Why, where are you going, and for how long?’

‘For ever!’ he answered shortly, but very wearily, gazing with sickening anxiety at her the while to try to discover some faint symptoms of regret in her fair face. She said nothing, however, but the warm blood that had dyed her brow on his first appearance vanished completely at his last sentence, leaving her quite destitute of colour, while, with head bent down and fingers trembling nervously, she trifled with a small pale blossom in her hand.

‘Why do you go?’ she asked presently, rather unsteadily, trying with determined anxiety to speak in her naturally clear voice and failing miserably.

‘Because I cannot stay,’ he answered, with suppressed vehemence, taking the little crushed flower from her hand without permission, and moving a few steps away from her. His voice grew strangely hoarse as he continued—‘Do you know it is nearly three full months since first I met you—three long months—and yet during all that time you have never bestowed on me so much as one civil sentence? Now, before I go, will you say something kind to me—something that I may remember gladly in the dreary days to come, and that will cause me to say in my own mind, “She once said that to me”?’

‘I hope you will be happy,’ Christine murmured, after a moment’s pause.

‘Not happiness—do not wish me happiness!’ the young man cried. ‘I am not mad enough to hope for that in this life. Wish me success.’

‘I do wish it,’ she answered faintly, turning slightly away from him, and putting up her hand to her white, round throat.

‘Thank you,’ he said simply. ‘And now there is nothing left but to bid you good-bye, and so leave you.’ She did not answer. ‘Will you not wish me good speed?’ he asked, coming a little nearer, and speaking reproachfully; whereat the girl suddenly, and with almost wild impulsiveness, came up to him, and placed both her hands in his, raising to his face, as she did so, two great sorrowing eyes, heavy with burning tears, which told him more plainly than any words could have conveyed that he held in his keeping the warm, wayward heart of Christine Harcourt.

‘My love, my love!’ was all he said; but he held her in his arms for one wild, delicious moment, after which he passed out into the glistening, golden sunshine, and hastened away under the spreading sheltering trees, without even daring to look back once to where he had left all that he held most sacred upon earth.

The next day the brother and sister left the cottage—the tiny home in which they had both known so many happy hours, and where Eric at least had endured in silence numberless torturing heartaches. To these two therefore the parting was fraught with much sadness, so that it was in utter silence and with deep regret that they bade farewell for ever to the picturesque little dwelling which for so long had sheltered them. Georgie had expressed a wish to visit Branksmere

once more before going farther north, the heir being still abroad; and, Eric being only too willing to forward her every wish, he had telegraphed to their old friend and adviser Mr. Topthorne to meet them there, and have one more happy day together before they set out for their new home.

It was a magnificent morning early in August when they again drove down the avenue of stately elms to stop at the hall-door of Branksmere, where they found the little lawyer waiting to receive and welcome them, looking in every respect precisely the same as when they had last parted, some three months before. He appeared more than glad to see them—in fact, his thin wrinkled face quite beamed with delight as he held kind little Georgie's hand within his own, and complimented her on the sweet freshness of her appearance—after which he asked them innumerable questions, inquiring closely and anxiously as to their reasons for quitting their last abode—which inquiries were answered by Eric with anything but a strict adherence to the truth. He put an end to them presently, however, by informing Georgie hastily that, if she wished to see the old place once more, she had better begin immediately, as the train left the station in about three hours. Thus admonished, they all began, without loss of time, the sorrowful task of inspecting a house full of the memories of bygone times.

Here was the schoolroom, where brains had been puzzled and tiny hands cramped with futile attempts to train a refractory pen in 'the way it should go;' and there was the ancient dining-room, where so many formal dinners had been eaten, and so many weary hours passed, without the customary pleasant table-talk. It seemed to Georgie that she could almost once again see the old Squire deep in thought at the top of the long wainscoted apartment, with the pompous old butler moving about in the ghostly silent manner he affected, helping and removing without the slightest sound of step or breathing to denote his presence. But day-dreams never linger long, and she woke from her reverie abruptly to wander through other rooms, and call up in them visions as lonely and saddening, yet very sweet withal. Finally, having traversed the well-remembered picture-gallery and their sleeping apartments, they descended silently the broad oak staircase to the hall, and passed into Eustace Morgan's study, the only room now left unvisited.

'How desolate everything looks,' Georgie said mournfully

—‘how cold and cheerless ! I think Mr. Morgan had better come back quickly, or he will find the old place gone to wrack and ruin. See—the pretty papering is all white in this part from mould.’

‘Ay, indeed,’ old Tophthorne agreed, with a dejected movement of his head, going over to where Eric was standing at the window, lost in buried thoughts and recollections.

‘Eric,’ the little lawyer was beginning gently, when a quick startled cry from Georgie caused them both to move towards her.

The girl was standing gazing fixedly at a large hollow in the wall before her, and trembling in every limb. A moment previously, having put up her hand to feel the damp upon the papering above the chimney-piece, the wall had given way beneath her fingers, and disclosed to her astonished view a small cupboard or recess in which lay, neatly folded, several papers.

Mr. Tophthorne, running eagerly forward and seizing the topmost packet, examined it carefully, and then fell back on to a chair, staring almost wildly at Eric the while. ‘The will !’ he gasped, when he could manage to speak. ‘It is your uncle’s will ! Eric, with Heaven’s help you shall be righted yet.’

Georgie fell upon her knees beside the old man’s chair, too overcome to stand. ‘Open it,’ she said.

‘Call up the servants, Eric, and send for some of the surrounding magistrates !’ cried Mr. Tophthorne excitedly, scarcely knowing what he was saying ; and, sure enough, when the will was formally read, it was discovered that Eustace Morgan had left the whole of his immense possessions to ‘my nephew Eric Dering,’ besides ten thousand pounds in funded property to ‘my beloved and beautiful niece Georgina Dering.’ There were numerous smaller bequests to old and faithful servants, including one hundred pounds each to the gardener and his son, who had been the two witnesses to this secret deed, one of whom, the father, had been dead for the last four months, whilst the younger man had sailed for America the year before the old Squire’s death, so that there had been nobody alive or in the way to disclose the existence of Mr. Morgan’s last will and testament until its fortunate discovery by Georgie Dering.

When the news had at length become clear to all, the girl’s first movement was to burst into tears of intense thank-

fulness, more indeed for her brother's sake than for her own; after which she came and placed her arms around his neck, whispering fondly as she did so, 'And now, Eric, will you not go to Christine?' He kissed her heartily when she had finished her little speech, telling her she had put his own thoughts into words—had in fact put forth the one idea that had been haunting him ever since his fallen fortunes had been restored.

'To-morrow,' he said—'I could not stay away from her any longer; so wish me luck, my darling.'

'I do,' his faithful little sister answered, with a bright smile, adding, 'and be sure you give my best love to all the Harcourt family.'

It was evening, a warm, dreamy, glorious evening that filled all his soul with thoughts half sweet, half sorrowful, as Eric once more approached the well-known precincts of Harcourt Hall. He walked as he had ever done through the grand old park, which seemed to welcome him with open branching arms as he passed through it, by the gurgling, rippling streams and sloping lawns, until he arrived at the perfumed, drowsy flower-garden where, at a little distance, he perceived the outlines of a figure that to him was the sweetest flower of all. Christine was dressed in soft floating white, with here and there a faint touch of blue, while her small hands were filled with scented, gorgeous flowers that seemed to droop, as though neglected, in her careless grasp as she looked away from them across the wooded landscape with a strange troubled expression in her beautiful hazel eyes.

As Eric's step came nearer she started nervously, and, turning quickly round, dropped all her flowers with a sudden, half-frightened exclamation.

'Mr. Dering!' she cried; and then all at once the troubled expression on her face changed to one of unmistakable gladness as she advanced swiftly towards him, holding out both her hands—warm, clinging little fingers, which he clasped fondly in his own, while a wild sense of almost uncontrollable happiness surged up in his heart, half choking him with its unwonted power.

'I have come back again, you see,' he said. 'You are glad to see me, are you not?'

'I knew you would come,' the girl answered, eagerly, earnestly. 'I prayed so hard that I might see you, if only

once again, to tell you how I hated myself for my conduct towards you, and to ask your forgiveness; that, I felt, I could not be denied. You do forgive me, Eric?’

‘My own, my dearest!’ Eric whispered passionately, drawing her closer to him, and holding her as though he never meant again to let her go, ‘if you think there is anything to be forgiven between us two, you can gain your pardon now in one way—give yourself to me. See—I have not come this time as a drawing-master, but as master of Branksmere lands, to ask Sir John Harcourt for his daughter, if only that daughter will tell me she truly loves me. Speak to me, Christine, my darling, and let me hear my sentence from your own dear lips.’

‘I do love you, Eric!’ she answered, smiling up at him through tender, blinding tears that came from the depths of her exquisite new-born happiness.

And Eric, seeing all the perfect love and peace that lit up her fair young face, kissed her softly, and was satisfied.

SWEET IS TRUE LOVE.

CHAPTER I.

‘So, for the sake of a paltry ten-pound note, I must stay away from the only ball I ever cared to go to!’ exclaimed Miss Blount indignantly. ‘Well, I must say I think it hard—very hard—more than most girls of my age would bear’—concluding her slightly mutinous speech with hurried bitterness, and turning aside to the window as an ominous rising in her throat gave warning that it was high time her eloquence should come to an end.

‘Eh? Well? What are you complaining of now, Kate?’ demanded the person addressed, raising his head abstractedly from the paper he was studying, with that far-away look in his face which most people acquire when their thoughts are in the clouds, and which is, of all expressions, the most aggravating to those on the watch for sympathy. ‘Oh, that everlasting ball of the Tauntons, eh?’ Well, I told you before it could not be, you know, and that should be sufficient. Stop that devil’s-tattoo on the window-pane, will you, unless you want to give me a headache with your restlessness!’

‘But why cannot I go?’ the girl went on, persistently facing the enemy once more as she spoke. ‘I don’t very often ask you for money, as you must allow, and——’

‘It is utterly out of the question,’ interrupted her father languidly, ‘so put it out of your head once for all. I could not let you have a farthing just now—even supposing it were a matter of life or death—being as hard up as I well can be—my usual condition, by-the-by. Look here, Katherine; if Barrington calls while I am away, send him up to the square field, will you, where I am going about those partridges? Come, Belle, Gallant, get up, you lazy brutes!’—disturbing

with his foot, as he finished speaking, two magnificent pointers as they lay dozing beside his chair.

The coolness of the refusal, knowing, as she did, how idly and selfishly her father's money was spent, together with his whole bearing, roused Miss Blount's quick temper beyond control.

'It would be better for you to give up your hunters and dogs, and dress your daughter properly, than to go on living beyond your means in the dishonourable way you are now doing!' she cried passionately, her fine eyes flashing.

'That is just one of the many points on which you and I so totally disagree,' Archibald Blount answered pleasantly, no whit moved from his usual calm, gentlemanly demeanour by his daughter's vehemence, moving indolently out of the room as he concluded, and closing the door with almost womanly gentleness behind him.

When he was gone, the girl clenched her small hands tightly together to keep down the rebellious tears, and, leaning her head back against the shutter, strove hard to suppress the feelings that rose so angrily within her.

As she thus stood, battling bravely with her thoughts, the dazzling August sun shone brightly down upon her, flushing her hair and face and figure with its gay warmth, so as literally to frame her in its yellow gold—and a very beautiful little face it was to frame, richly tinted, changeable, and passionate, expressing only too clearly at times the secret workings of her heart. Her eyes were singularly lovely, of a fine deep hazel, large, and sometimes touching in their pathos; albeit it must be confessed that she was by no means angelic in her tendencies, her celestial qualities being decidedly few and far between, and heavily blended with our coarser earth besides. Her mouth was not small, nor was it perfect, and her colour was an unmistakable gipsy-brown; but for all that she was as sweet and lovable and perverse a creature as ever decorated the earth or broke the heart of man.

Numerous were the victims who cried for quarter to Miss Blount; indeed, she had it very much her own way with the sterner sex, few being able to withstand her tender, wild, childish beauty, even hardy veterans giving in hopelessly to the little queen who thinned their ranks so mercilessly. Old and young, grave and gay, succumbed without a murmur to her smiles.

With women, however, she scarcely got on so well, her

exquisite, unsatisfied face being no passport to their favour. They could see no charms in it for their part—voted her ‘odd—peculiar—horribly fast—barely good-looking,’ according to each speaker’s own view of the case, and sought to ‘keep her down’ with all their might, though to no purpose; for, after employing all the energy they were capable of to reduce her to the common level, they were fain to confess that Katherine heeded them not. She lived her life alone, careless of their approbation or the reverse, and but for Harriet Charteris would, in all probability, have possessed no female friend.

Her father, Archibald Blount, was cold, worldly, and selfish to the heart’s core. No love for his beautiful child ever warmed or brightened the stagnant feelings of his breast; she was there—before his eyes—the living image of her dead mother, but to him she was little more than an encumbrance, the unwished-for consequence of a regretted marriage.

It was small wonder the girl should, under the circumstances, pay but little outward respect to his wishes or commands, though in her inmost heart there lay hidden for him a lasting love, far stronger than even she herself believed could possibly have existed for the father who held her in such slight estimation, and spent his time in racing or betting, or gambling away the small income—a remnant of his once princely fortune—that sufficed to keep them from utter destitution.

She was a neglected flower, a tender creature growing up unheeded and unloved, at least by him who ought to have been her chief counsellor, but who, if ever he bestowed a thought upon her, dreamed only of the time when her marvellous beauty should procure her a wealthy suitor, and so bring him the only thing he really cared for—money. Small wonder was it either if Katherine Blount herself discovered early an intense longing for money, for the wealthy freedom that should at all hazards release her from the influence of poverty and its attendant curses.

Leaning back now, with her head against the woodwork of the window, she almost swore to herself that no love-dreams should come between her and her hopes of earthly riches; and, as she so thought with bitter earnestness, her reverie was suddenly broken in upon by the entrance of a young man of about four-and-twenty, who, coming over to the window, sank lazily into a chair directly opposite to her. For a moment he gazed wonderingly at the girl’s half-averted sorrowful face,

whereon the recent tears had left their silent traces; after which scrutiny he inquired, without any very great regard to the selection of his language—

‘What’s up?’

‘For goodness’ sake, why cannot you speak proper English?’ Miss Blount asked pettishly, glancing swiftly round from the window as she spoke. ‘“What’s up?”—now how am I to understand what you mean by that, unless’—with a short laugh—‘you meant my temper? That is “up” to all intents and purposes, I allow you. Did you mean it?’

‘No, my dear, I did not,’ the young man answered calmly; ‘I am only anxious to learn what it is that has grieved you during my absence. Will you tell me?’

‘What is the use?’ Miss Blount inquired, still with the sense of injury full upon her. ‘You cannot help me, and most probably, if I told you my grievance, would only consider me silly. All men consider a girl frivolous if she happens to wish for a little more than the common necessities of life.’

‘There is an exception to every rule, so put me out of that list,’ her companion answered, getting up from his seat and possessing himself of one of the little nervous hands that for the past few minutes had been endeavouring most laudably to work a hole in the handkerchief they held. ‘I do not belong to it, as I could hardly think you frivolous even if I tried, or—or anything else unpleasant, I fancy; so tell me your misfortune, and let me assist you if I can.’

‘Well, it is all about the Tauntons’ ball,’ the girl murmured, softened by his evident sympathy, and reddening furiously the while, but refusing, crimson nevertheless, to remove her eyes from his. ‘I cannot go because I have no dress nice enough, and papa will not give me a new one—that is all; so now confess at once that you think me ridiculous, and have done with it.’

‘Poor little thing!’ was all the other said, but his eyes wandered out to the glowing garden, whither his thoughts followed, running riot amongst the flowers, as he concocted all sorts of schemes for the express purpose of gratifying Katherine’s last whim. Of course she should have a dress, but who would choose it for him, and, when chosen, how should he persuade her to accept it? And then he wondered what colour would be most becoming to the perplexed little beauty at his side; after which he got puzzled, and fell to wondering

about many other things quite as Quixotic as they were agreeable.

Miss Blount, who was watching his countenance with furtive anxiety, guessed quite correctly all the ideas that were tormenting him, and was immensely amused accordingly.

'It is of no use, Blackwood,' she said—'you cannot help me. Give it up, dear boy, and I dare say presently I shall be reconciled to my fate; but'—and here the softness vanished, the old hard look taking its place—'I swear that, if I can avoid it, I will not end my days in this kind of poverty; I shall marry riches, or not at all.'

He dropped her hand hurriedly, almost rudely, and turned away.

'Money does not always mean happiness,' he said.

'But poverty is always unhappiness,' she retorted quickly.

'Tita,' he reasoned, after a moment's pause—she generally went by the name of 'Tita'—short for Titania—with her two most intimate friends, on account of her fairy-like proportions—'Tita, do not place too much dependence upon riches; they will fail you in the end, my dearest—believe me, they will—whereas love that never dies, and a bare sufficiency, will carry you through all difficulties.'

'As, for instance?' she asked, half mockingly. But, whatever his sentiments on the subject of that much-discussed topic, 'a sufficiency,' might be, she was never doomed to hear them, as at this juncture the door was once more opened slowly, to admit Archibald Blount. He advanced in his usual well-bred manner until he had reached the table, whereon he deposited a piece of crumpled paper.

'I have changed my mind, Katherine,' he said. 'Here is a ten-pound note for you; so you can go to this much-coveted ball, if you wish.'

'Oh, papa,' exclaimed Miss Blount, regretting bitterly now all the hasty words and thoughts she had been indulging in, 'forgive me! I do not deserve your kindness, I know, after what I said to you a few moments ago; but, believe me, I am very grateful to you.' Yet still she did not move forward to kiss him, as perhaps a more beloved daughter would have done.

'Do not distress yourself, my dear,' her father replied, with the faintest inflection of sarcasm in his voice. 'I am so well accustomed to your numerous little tender speeches that they ceased to embarrass me long ere this;' and so saying he went out, closing the door carefully behind him.

‘I have wronged him,’ Miss Blount said, with extreme compunction, when she was again alone with her cousin. ‘I have wronged him greatly both in word and thought; but that is just like me, is it not—so ready to judge, so quick to condemn, and never hesitating a moment to think before I speak? Ah, if I could only change my nature in some things, I do believe in the end I might learn to be happy!’

‘And are you not happy now, Tita?’ Blackwood asked, gazing down with unspeakable tenderness upon the disconsolate little person beside him, who, with folded hands and moistened eyes, looked blankly out of the window; and as he spoke he took her chin between his hands, so turning her face towards him.

‘Not as happy as I might be,’ she answered, glancing back into the face above her own—as brave, kindly, and true a face as a woman need care to see—‘not as happy as most of the girls I know. Do you know, at times I am even miserably discontented with my lot? But there—it is my portion in this life to have trouble, I suppose, so I dare say by-and-by I shall get used to it.’

‘Katherine,’ said Blackwood wistfully, ‘my darling, I cannot bear to hear you talk like this. I wish to Heaven I had it in my power now to shield you from every grief and pain; but at present what can I do? Perhaps afterwards—in time—if you will wait a little——’

‘Hush!’ Miss Blount interrupted him quickly, eagerly, laying her hand with unconscious vehemence upon his arm, while a spasm of intense pain shot across her face. ‘Hush, Blackwood—you must not speak to me like that! I will not have it. You are my cousin—my brother—the dearest a girl could have, but nothing more—never anything more.’

The expression of Blackwood’s eyes changed.

‘Do not pretend to make any mistake,’ he said, almost sternly, unloosing her fingers from his arm and holding them firmly between his own. ‘You know as well as I do that, for everything the world contains, I would not be your brother. You know also that I will be to you all or nothing.’

‘It must be nothing then,’ the girl answered very sadly, though firmly, but not daring this time to raise her eyes to his; after which she walked away slowly to the door without another word. Arrived there, however, she lingered—woman-like—with the handle in her hand, to see if he would not make some answer to her last cruel speech; but she waited in vain.

Blackwood made no reply; and, glancing involuntarily towards the window, to where the autumn sun was gleaming brightly upon his upright figure, she could see that the dark, handsome, loyal face was white to the very lips.

Blackwood Craven was Miss Blount's first cousin, as far as relationship went, but in reality he had ever been far more to her than that term generally signifies; in her babyhood he had been her companion, in her girlhood a brother, and ever since she had reached the age of seventeen—now three years since—her steady and constant lover.

His father had died when the boy was still in his infancy, and the mother, dying some few years later, had confided the child on her death-bed to her only brother, Archibald Blount, together with a few hundred pounds, and an earnest prayer that he would do the best he could for her little one. This prayer Mr. Blount attended to as carefully as it was in his indolent, selfish nature to attend to anything unconnected with his own personal interests, sending his nephew to school, and from school to college, with the money entrusted to his care, until the lad had finished his education, and had come home at last, only to fall madly in love with his beautiful cousin. Then it is hard to say what would have become of the handsome, restless fellow, had not a brother of his father's come forward, and obtained for him a commission in a Line regiment—a profession very much suited to the young man's own tastes and inclinations.

This same relative, dying soon after, left his nephew two hundred a year—whereas he might quite as easily have left him two thousand—upon which, and his pay as lieutenant, Blackwood Craven found it excessively difficult to get through his days and live respectably without incurring too numerous liabilities.

His attachment to Katherine Blount was the one ruling passion of his life. She was part of his existence. He worshipped the girl with blind idolatry, pouring out on her a generous wealth of love of which she was scarcely worthy. In his eyes, however, she was perfection, no flaw ever appearing to his stricken sight powerful enough to dim the faultlessness of his idol, while he ever dreamed fondly, unceasingly, of the time when this woman, who was to him a very goddess, should be his wife.

His poverty was an insurmountable barrier in the present, it was true; but in time, if she would only consent to wait a

little—and something whispered to him that he was surely more to her than all the other men who thronged around her and basked in her sweet smiles—he would conquer fortune bravely, and claim her honourably for his own. So he argued ; and not all Katherine's chilling speeches or hasty frowns could entirely check the mad longing of his heart.

At times indeed the utter hopelessness of his project would strike himself, crumbling to atoms all his pleasant castles in the air, when he would make up his mind to fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, and so escape the fascinations of her presence—all which intentions were very wise and laudable so long as they lasted, which was precisely until Miss Blount's irresistible, piquant, brilliant face smiled on him once more, when he would again fling to the winds all his settled dreams of flight, and, hugging closely the bright deceptive present, refuse to look forward into the bitter future.

Such scenes as that just described had become of late very frequent between them—a warfare in which sometimes one, sometimes the other, came off victorious. To-day indeed the game was in Miss Blount's small hands, however it might be to-morrow ; and yet somehow, in spite of her triumph, the girl felt a certain heavy weight lying coldly upon her heart, as she closed the library door and walked forward into the hall.

'What can be the matter with me?' she asked herself impatiently, pushing back her hair wearily from her forehead. 'Blackwood's face is haunting me, and I seem to have lost all longing for this ball I was so ready to cry about not five minutes ago. I want air, I suppose, to dispel my fancies, so I shall just order my horse and go over to Harry Charteris to see if she cannot rouse me from this strange depression'—having come to which decision, she gave her orders to a passing servant, and went slowly and listlessly up the stairs to exchange her morning-dress for her habit.

CHAPTER II.

HARRIET CHARTERIS was Miss Blount's only woman friend and adviser ; and naturally she was as unlike Miss Blount both in disposition and appearance as it was possible for her to be. She was fair, of middle stature, lived about three miles

from Blount Manor, and was possessed of considerable attractions, a handsome house, a husband, two charming sons, and as many admirers as any woman need care to count; she was 'fast,' she talked a little slang, she was adored by her husband, and by at least half a dozen of his male acquaintances, and she flirted a good deal, besides all which, as might have been expected, she hunted.

Yes, she actually hunted, not like most girls, who go to the meet simply to see the hounds throw off, and then ride innocently home again, but straight over hedges and ditches, at the very heels of the men, in the most disgracefully masculine manner imaginable. Why, it was only the other day that she actually got a fall jumping over a high wall, tore her habit to pieces, and had every man in the field about her in less than two minutes, when, instead of being heartily ashamed of herself and going home directly to her poor little neglected babes, she must needs mount her horse again and come in second at the 'finish.'

Indeed, the feeling amongst her own sex had been strengthening day by day against pretty light-hearted Mrs. Charteris ever since her husband had first brought her home to his handsome residence; and matters might have come to a decisive climax had not the all-powerful Duchess of Alwyn been so struck by her prowess in the hunting-field as to demand an introduction immediately, taking particular care to be civil to her ever afterwards both at home and abroad.

Lady Florence followed in her mother's footsteps, and declared her to be 'of all women the most charming, don't you know;' while the Duke himself, who was rather a 'rough customer,' and devoted to 'pluck' of all kinds, gave it as his own strictly private opinion that the woman who could take 'that last fence' so gallantly 'must be a trump, sir, begad, and game to no end,' with various other recommendations to the same effect, more forcible perhaps than elegant.

This aristocratic intervention slightly turned the tide in Mrs. Charteris's favour, as far as knowing her went, though it only heightened private hatred and resentment. Not that she ever did anything to cause this unrelenting animosity, beyond dressing better and looking lovelier and gaining more admiration in a day than her neighbours could ever hope to receive in their lives; but then what woman can ever forgive any of these three things? Certainly Mrs. Charteris's neighbours were unfriendly to the last degree, which was perhaps the

primary cause of the great friendship subsisting between her and Katherine Blount.

Charlie Charteris, her husband, was a confirmed bookworm—a naturalist—and spent most of his time in a little ‘den’ of his own, littered pretty nearly from floor to ceiling with dried ferns, wingless insects, obnoxious reptiles, and torn tattered parchments. Here he spent the greater part of his day, and here his wife—whose favourite resort it was, and who had admission at all hours—seated on the top of some of his choicest papers, seemed to shed beauty and warmth around the silent pre-occupied man, to whom she was as a bright sunbeam, and who possessed, whole and entire, the deep affection of her warm pure heart.

Such was Katherine Blount’s chosen friend; and to Castle Park it was that she wended her way, riding slowly and meditatively through the green lanes and under the branching trees, which shed soft showers of faded leaves upon her head, until she arrived at her destination, where she made the slightly disconcerting discovery that, in spite of her determination not to do so when leaving, she had thought of nothing but Blackwood Craven’s dark dejected face the entire way.

‘Tita, my dearest, is it really you?’ cried Mrs. Charteris, running merrily down the broad stone steps of the entrance to Miss Katherine, as the latter flung herself impatiently out of the saddle without a moment’s warning. ‘I am so awfully glad to see you. Come in and spend the day with me—do. Charlie has just got some new insect with forty legs, and wings to correspond, so he is lost to me for goodness knows how long, and it will be quite charitable of you to take pity on me. But what is the matter with you, darling? Are you vexed about anything?’

‘No, it is only the heat,’ Miss Blount declared. ‘On the contrary, I have good news. Papa—after I had abused him heartily in my inmost soul for about an hour—relented, and gave me money to buy a new dress for the Tauntons’ ball; so I am perhaps just a little bit put out, you see, at having wronged him in my thoughts so much.’

‘Nonsense,’ cried Harry, leading her visitor into an exquisitely-furnished little boudoir—‘you don’t say so! Well, I am astonished at his amiability, and a wee bit disappointed perhaps, as I had ordered a dress for you myself. There! You need not get so indignantly crimson—you are quite independent of my impertinent interference now. But

tell me when it was your father became conscious of his iniquity.'

'More than an hour ago,' Miss Blount answered—'just after Captain Barrington arrived about some partridges for next month's shooting. I saw him pass the garden on his way to the square field, where papa was.'

Mrs. Charteris laughed.

'I don't want to destroy the admiration you are cherishing for your father's unprecedented conduct,' she said, 'but I almost think I can guess what changed his mind. Did you not hear that Sir Mark Warrenne returned to the Hall the evening before last? And cannot you fancy how eager the Tauntons will be to have him at their ball—and what a desirable match the wealthy Baronet will be for Mr. Blount's beautiful daughter? Now do not look so savage, Tita—it is horribly unbecoming to your style; and do not make up your mind—as I see you are doing—to revenge all this on the poor young man himself. He is totally unconscious of the whole concern, you know, and you owe him a debt of gratitude, as, but for his providential arrival at this particular time, you would in all probability never have danced at the Tauntons' ball.'

'If I believed what you said to be really the case,' Miss Blount began angrily, 'I should——'

'No; you would not, my dear, depend upon it,' interrupted Mrs. Charteris provokingly, 'as he is one of the nicest fellows I ever met. I know him extremely well, you know, having been introduced to him last year in Switzerland, when he took the greatest fancy to me, and travelled about with us afterwards for at least two months. I liked him extremely, and have kept up a correspondence with him ever since; besides, he has fourteen thousand a year, and a delightful place—quite enough to make Pluto himself lovely in these degenerate days—and is just the very man for you.'

'And is old and ugly, I think you forgot to add,' Miss Blount put in languidly, without the faintest suspicion of interest in her voice.

'No, he isn't,' Harriet answered gaily; 'he is everything your fancy could possibly paint him—"lovely" as Apollo, but, thank Heaven, by no means "divine." And, if you are a very good little girl, and play your cards properly, I will put in such a telling word for you that in the long run he will infallibly be "thine."'

‘I do think, Harry, that at times you have not a particle of sense,’ Miss Blount exclaimed, amused at the other’s absurdity in spite of herself; whereupon the two friends broke into merry laughter, and went upstairs together to inspect Harry’s dress for the coming ball, and decide on the colour most becoming to Katherine Blount.

Having at length, after a somewhat stormy debate, arrived at the satisfactory conclusion that Miss Blount would make a very presentable appearance in white and amber, the two began to meditate a descent on Charlie’s sanctum, for the express purpose of carrying off its occupant forcibly to luncheon from amongst his beloved beetles, when a horse’s hoofs ringing on the hard gravel arrested their steps. Mrs. Charteris’s bedroom, being in the front of the house, overlooked a great part of the avenue, so, running hastily to the window to ascertain who the new-comer might be, she was both startled and delighted to perceive that it was no less a person than Sir Mark Warrenne himself.

‘Tita,’ she cried, ‘who do you think it is? The veritable knight we have been discussing. How fortunate that he came just now—you always look so delicious in your riding costume! Come down, my dear, at once. I have set my heart upon this match. Tita’—with a sudden start—‘what on earth is the matter with you, child?’—gazing anxiously at Miss Blount, who was standing nervously, irresolutely, in the centre of the apartment, her cheeks flushed and her fine eyes full of tears. A new idea struck her friend. ‘Katherine,’ she whispered, ‘tell me—is there anything between you and—your cousin?’

‘Nonsense,’ Katherine answered, almost angrily, ‘how can you talk such utter folly? Do you not know that Blackwood and I have been brother and sister ever since I can remember? Come’—changing her whole bearing with a visible effort—‘we are only wasting valuable time here, when we might be—according to your showing—so much better employed; so take me downstairs, Harry, and introduce me to your handsome hero.’ And as she finished speaking she held out her hand to Mrs. Charteris with a pretty wilful grace and a sudden assumption of good spirits that only partially imposed on her quick-witted, watchful friend.

However, she made no further remark just then, but took the girl’s proffered hand fondly in her own, and led her downstairs into the tasteful, sunny drawing-room, where Sir Mark Warrenne was introduced to Katherine Blount, and where

Miss Blount made herself as disagreeable as she very well could to that exceedingly inoffensive young man.

Mrs. Charteris was provoked beyond measure—how could Katherine show herself in such an unfavourable light?—and set herself with laudable perseverance to turn the conversation into a more congenial channel, finally suggesting luncheon as a last resource. This was always a pleasant meal at Castle Park, servants being strictly excluded, and a general air of unconventionality pervading the whole atmosphere; so Harriet fondly hoped that Katherine might thaw if exposed to its influence.

‘I hope you have come home for good this time, Sir Mark,’ she began presently, smiling in her pretty, friendly manner at the Baronet.

‘I cannot say whether it will be for good exactly,’ he answered pleasantly, ‘but I have at last made up my mind to give the old country a fair trial. You see, after you left, Mrs. Charteris, I found travelling about by myself just the slightest degree in the world slow, so I threw it up after a few months’ longer wandering. A fellow does feel the want of friends at some time or other during his life, I suppose, and my turn has come now.’

‘I am afraid, for all that, you will miss the warm Italian skies and the beautiful Italian faces more than you fancy possible, after a while,’ Mrs. Charteris went on, ‘and we shall be losing you again in a few months or so.’

‘I hardly think that,’ he answered. ‘My tastes are not altogether so foreign as you seem to imagine; indeed, to please me, I have seen more real beauty since my return to the old place than ever I saw abroad.’ And involuntarily as he spoke his eyes fell on the exquisite downcast face of Miss Blount, who was sturdily demolishing her cold fowl in the most provokingly practical manner conceivable.

‘There! What a compliment to our dear old England!’ Harriet exclaimed. ‘I feel quite proud when I recollect you are just fresh from the “Land of Beauty.” Tita, will you not acknowledge that it was a pretty speech?’

‘Very,’ Miss Blount replied, with abominable coolness, and without deigning to raise her eyes—‘quite the prettiest thing I ever heard, and so original. But, unfortunately, it has rather lost its charm for me, as I am quite tired of being told how extremely lovely I am.’

Mrs. Charteris was aghast. She had never seen Katherine

in such a wayward mood before, and could have shaken her heartily had they been alone. But Sir Mark was inexpressibly amused at the novelty of her impertinence, and laughed.

‘I am not surprised at your being bored on that subject,’ he said; ‘but I am rather sorry too, as I suppose my poor appreciation goes for little or nothing?’

‘For nothing,’ the girl answered, with sudden animation, raising her magnificent eyes for an instant, and flashing a glance at him that puzzled him considerably at the moment and for a long time afterwards.

‘Well, I sha’n’t waste my sweetness,’ he said carelessly. ‘Mrs. Charteris, shall I give you a little more chicken?’

‘No, thank you,’ Harriet answered cheerfully; ‘but you may open the bottle of champagne behind you, if you will be so kind, as we all seem sinking into the gloomiest spirits.’

‘May I help you, Miss Blount,’ Sir Mark asked presently, having done as he was desired, and gazing down inquiringly into Katherine’s beautiful but disdainful face, ‘that is, without any danger of further offending you, I mean?’

‘Offending me!’ Miss Blount echoed, with well-assumed innocence, a look of perfect astonishment overspreading her features. ‘I am not offended—how could you think so? As you see me now, so I am always, it is my natural manner.’

‘Oh, indeed! I was fancying otherwise,’ Warrenne said, with a slight smile, accepting her statement in seemingly perfect good faith. ‘Then I may help you;’ after which he sat down again, and addressed himself exclusively to Mrs. Charteris.

In two or three minutes Katherine rose.

‘I must be going,’ she said. ‘Papa and Blackwood will be wondering what has become of me. Good-bye, Harry; you will drive me into Belton to-morrow, will you not?’

‘Of course I will,’ Mrs. Charteris answered, kissing her affectionately. ‘Good-bye until then, and take care of yourself; it is rather wild of you, is it not, to ride over here all the way without a groom?’

They had reached the hall door by this time, where Miss Blount’s horse stood, held by one of the Castle men.

‘Will you allow me to escort you home?’ Sir Mark asked. ‘I can take care of you, I fancy, and so put Mrs. Charteris’s mind at rest about your safety.’

‘Thank you,’ Katherine answered, placing the tiniest foot

he had ever yet seen in the palm of his hand, preparatory to mounting, 'but I could not dream of giving you so much trouble. Besides'—ungraciously—'I generally prefer riding by myself.'

'Conclusive,' returned the young man, reddening a little, but gathering up the reins quietly and putting them into her hand, while Harriet felt almost ready to cry with vexation at the girl's wilfulness. 'But I am sorry for my own sake that solitary rides are so much in favour with you, as it would have given me great pleasure to accompany you so far.'

Miss Blount relented. After all, it was not his fault, and probably he would never even want to marry her—it was not wronging Blackwood in any way to be commonly civil to him. So she turned and made amends for her rudeness very prettily.

'If it will really give you any pleasure,' she said softly, bestowing a remarkably sweet repentant little smile on him the while, which was her method of being 'commonly civil' to young men, 'you can come; but I warn you that I am not the most agreeable person in the world to ride with.'

'Thank you,' Sir Mark found himself saying very gratefully. And so they rode down the long avenue of chestnuts together, little dreaming of the future that lay before them.

Three miles is a short ride, taking small time to travel, so it was not very long before they arrived at the Manor gate, where Warrenne drew rein and paused.

'Will you not come in?' Miss Blount asked, her manner more friendly than it had been hitherto. 'You knew papa long ago, I think, when I was away at school, and Blackwood—did you know him?'

'Your father and I were very good friends,' Sir Mark answered. 'I will call to-morrow and renew our acquaintance, as I cannot come in this evening, thank you; but "Blackwood" I have not the pleasure of knowing—he is your brother?'

'No, my cousin,' the girl answered, with a certain half-shy embarrassment in her voice which she somehow found impossible to restrain, and which caused the Baronet to feel a most unreasonable pain somewhere about the region of the heart—a pain he would have scorned to call jealousy, but which nevertheless was remarkably like it.

'Oh, your cousin!' he said simply. 'Good-bye, Miss Blount.' But he pressed her hand with unusual warmth,

and went on his way musing vaguely about divers things that in some unaccountable manner always merged into a recollection of Katherine Blount's mocking irresistible face.

Meanwhile that young lady had cantered gaily enough up the gravelled walk, all her old spirits quite restored now that the obnoxious Baronet was out of her sight, and, having dismounted and run upstairs to change her dress for dinner, had come down again, radiant in beauty and white muslin, to encounter her cousin in the hall.

'Where have you been all the day?' he inquired lovingly, taking both her hands in the old familiar fashion, and looking with true warm admiration into her eyes. 'Riding?'

'Yes, riding,' Katherine answered, feeling unusually glad to see him, and smiling brightly up into his face. 'I went over to see Harry and tell her all about this ball affair, you know.'

'Yes, I know,' he said, still retaining her hands, as though loth to part with them, 'and—did you hear that Sir Mark Warrenne has returned to the Hall?'

'Yes,' a vivid unwished-for blush crimsoning her cheeks. 'I met him to-day at Harriet's.'

'Did you?' Blackwood said with sudden bitterness, as he marked the conscious flushing of her face; and he dropped the little clinging fingers hurriedly, as though their kindly touch had burned him.

CHAPTER III.

THE Tauntons' ball was as great a success as anybody could possibly have wished; as indeed most balls in the country are, so little formality is mixed up with the amusement, so much real enjoyment mingled with the outward fun. Miss Blount, in her gleaming white and amber, looked 'every inch' a fairy queen, or anything else unusually lovely, all the night—at least so thought Sir Mark Warrenne, to whom she appeared on that particular evening and ever afterwards the 'darlingest' girl in all the world. He fell in love with her hopelessly, irrevocably, as entirely as even Harriet Charteris could have wished, and was perpetually bringing over flowers, and sending up to London for books and music, all to make excuses for his incessant visits to the old Manor. After a few ineffectual struggles to maintain her former stiff demeanour

Miss Blount succumbed, and treated him with that strange insidious mixture of womanly gentleness and childish petulance so dangerously sweet to all those who were unlucky enough to enroll themselves under her banner.

Archibald Blount was more than satisfied with the state of things; affairs seemed improving, and brighter days loomed in the misty future. Already he saw visions and dreamed dreams of the time to come when his pockets should be once more amply filled, and the old place renovated from garret to basement. He thought with exultant glee of the brilliant prospect in store for him, when, thanks to his daughter's wealth, he would be for the remainder of his days far beyond the reach of that dread nightmare, Debt, and enabled to compass many things necessary to his own individual comfort, now utterly unattainable. So he calculated; and meantime Sir Mark, with the nervous timidity of a blushing schoolboy—despite his twenty-seven years—was wondering when he should dare to lay his fourteen thousand a year at Miss Blount's diminutive feet, while Blackwood Craven, in the background of the picture, was quietly eating his heart away in silent bitter hopelessness.

One morning early, about eleven o'clock, Sir Mark Warrenne called at the Manor, and found Miss Blount in the smaller flower-garden overlooked by the drawing-room windows. Crossing the lawn and vaulting the wire partition that separated the parterre where she was standing from the outer grass, he came up to her, and held out his hand.

'Good-morning,' he said.

'Good-morning,' returned Katherine politely, returning his smile sweetly, and giving him her hand with much friendliness. 'You are determined we shall not call you lazy. Have you had your breakfast?'

'Hours ago. I have forgotten all about it. What! Would you have me lie in bed with the merry sun so high in the heavens? I am not such a sluggard as that.'

'I apologise,' said Katherine, with mock humility: 'yet still I plead guilty to a feeling of intense curiosity. You must not think me rude or imagine yourself unwelcome—but what has brought you here at this hour?'

'An overpowering desire to see you again'—with a laugh that completely banished all suspicion of lovemaking—'and—the fact is, I am going fishing—my rod is at the house. Will you come?'

‘You take my breath away. Let me consider.’

‘You said a few days since you rather liked the sport, because it was an idle one and entailed little exertion. You see I do not forget your smallest remarks. Pray do not look so superciliously at my clothes—you make me feel uncomfortable. I suppose I ought to make excuses for my toilet; but, if my costume is aged, my heart at least is young, as they say at the Adelphi.’

‘I assure you,’ returned Katherine, laughing and blushing prettily, ‘I was not thinking about your clothes at all—I—’

‘I am certain you were,’ he said; ‘your face betrays you. I own myself I don’t exactly admire fishing-boots. About six years ago I used to affect the most ravishing attire when going on these excursions—used to get myself up “regardless of expense,” and looked upon my tailor as the most talented man of my acquaintance. But time cures all things, and you see me now a sadder but a wiser man. Besides, I have captured so many unwary fish in this coat that I have quite a superstition about it. But you do not answer. Will you come? Do come, Miss Blount, and I will let you have all the fish—there! You cannot refuse so noble an offer.’

‘I could,’ declared Katherine, ‘if I tried.’

‘Then don’t try.’

‘By-the-by’—laughing—‘if you had said nothing about your shabbiness, I should never have found it out, and might have imagined your coat fresh from Poole.’

‘Your imagination must be your strong point. Never mind—I made you blush in the first instance, and that compensates me. When you blush you look very—— Come, I am eager to be at the “silvery trout.”’

‘One word before I decide. Are you going to use flies or—worms?’

‘If I say the latter?’

‘Then I shall say “No.”’

‘And if I say the former?’

‘Then I shall say “Yes.”’

‘The “Ayes” have it,’ Sir Mark cried triumphantly. ‘I am using flies, and nothing else. Now you have no excuse but to come.’

‘The only drawback,’ said Katherine, still hesitating, ‘is my gown’—casting a doubtful glance at her white dress. ‘Can I go like this?’

‘Oh, no, not like that—you would utterly ruin your

finery for ever! Put on something dark, and you will be all right.'

'And supposing I haven't it?'

'A thought so horrible would never suggest itself. Now hurry—the morning is taking to itself wings and flying away.'

Katherine ran into the house, threw aside the dress she wore, equipped herself in one more suitable, all in a wonderfully short space of time, and ran down the stairs again to find him waiting for her in the hall.

'Am I arrayed to your satisfaction?' she asked gaily, placing her hands behind her back and trying to look like a naughty child going through its morning task.

'No—more to my discomfiture,' replied he, with rather more fondness in his tone than he had hitherto allowed himself.

Katherine made no reply, but, colouring faintly, followed him out into the warm, sweet-scented autumn air.

Through the grass they went, at first silently, then with small attempts at conversation which increased and strengthened after a while.

'You and your cousin are very intimate—quite like brother and sister,' said Sir Mark presently, *à propos* of nothing that had gone before.

'Quite,' assented Katherine concisely, who hardly cared to carry on the conversation.

'It must be very pleasant for you to have him with you—this place is so dull.'

'I do not find it so.'

'No? But what is there to do?'

'Trout-fishing, for instance,' suggested Katherine archly.

'So there is. Do you—ever go fishing with your cousin?'

'I haven't been lately. Long ago, when we were children, I used to go with him.'

'He is very handsome.'

'Is he?'

'Yes; don't you think so?'—glancing at her searchingly.

'I am so accustomed to his face, you see,' replied Katherine, with assumed indifference, though she knew her face had crimsoned vividly, to her great disgust. 'But where are we going? Have you decided on any particular spot?'

'The mill-stream is a capital place for trout. There is a little pool there that swarms with fish—do you know it?—high up, rather near the mill itself.'

‘Just below the sluice?’ asked Katherine.

‘Exactly. I believe you are a cleverer hand at fishing than I am myself. See, there is the old mill; how pretty it looks with its ivy-covered walls! When I was a boy this was my favourite haunt.’

‘How romantic! To make the story complete, there should be a miller’s daughter for you to fall in love with, and sacrifice your all to marry.’

‘I do not think I should fancy a miller’s daughter—a “bread-and-butter miss” in dreadful earnest. She would be so overgrown and so unmistakably healthy in appearance. Besides, I have my ideal formed—it is too late for me to think of changing.’

‘You are sincere?’

‘Fatally so, for my own happiness.’

‘And your ideal? Describe her to me.’

‘Your looking-glass would give you a very fair description,’ replied he, without looking at her.

She frowned slightly, and then dismissed her anger as unfounded. After all, many a man had paid her compliments; why should she resent this one in particular?

‘Here is the spot you mean,’ she said quietly, pointing to a broad dark pool, which seemed almost a resting-place in the centre of the stream. There had been a good deal of rain for the past few days, and the river was much swollen. Here and there it rose above its banks.

About a yard distant from the edge of the meadow on which they stood, where Warrenne set vigorously to work to prepare his rod and choose his choicest fly, a large stone rose high in the stream, and, being flat, formed a secure standing-place.

‘I think,’ said Katherine pointing to it, ‘if I stood there, I could see you better, and be nearer to you.’

‘That would be an advantage to me,’ he remarked calmly, without removing his eyes from his fly-book; ‘in a minute or two I will put you there.’

‘If you jump on to it, and give me your hand, I can spring there easily,’ said she.

‘I doubt it—it is farther than you think. Better let me carry you across; my boots—that you so admired a while ago—will prevent my getting the least wet.’

‘No, I need not give you all that trouble. I can manage so much, I fancy; you forget I am not a town-bred young lady, unequal to any exertion.’

‘It would not give me any trouble,’ he said—‘on the contrary, it would be a pleasure. And, if you were to jump short and get wet, I should never forgive myself. Besides, think of the dreadful scolding I should receive from Mr. Blount.’

‘I don’t think you would,’ remarked Katherine dryly. ‘Come, how long you are arranging your flies! I shall think you a mere tyro in the art if you do not hurry.’

‘When you speak to me in that tone you make me tremble, and all my skilful knots come undone. Now I believe I am ready at last.’

‘Then help me over,’ she exclaimed.

‘You won’t let me carry you then?’—persuasively.

‘No, thank you. I would not let you imagine me so helpless.’

‘The risk be on your own head!’ cried he; and, springing to the rocky stone in question, he stretched out his hand to her.

It was a considerable distance, but Miss Blount cleared it successfully, and landed high and dry beside him.

‘Now go back to the bank, and try your luck,’ she said.

‘Is one ever lucky when overlooked by a woman?’ asked Warrenne ruefully. ‘I feel as if the eyes of Europe were upon me, and know I shall sink for ever in your estimation as a distinguished pupil of Izaak Walton.’

‘Don’t be shy,’ said Katherine, ‘or frightened. I promise I won’t upbraid, even though we return home empty-handed. Indeed, I think I would rather the poor pretty little things should escape.’

‘I knew a man who went out nine times with two girls of his acquaintance, fishing—very pretty girls they were too—and not one fish did he catch during the entire time. On the tenth day he went alone, and caught three dozen; and of course they didn’t believe it, and said he bought them. They used to chaff him awfully about it, and tell every one in an innocent way that they adored going fishing with Captain Browne, because he never hurt their feelings by killing anything. If I am equally unfortunate to-day, you must promise not to laugh at me. If you do, I will never forgive you.’

‘I will make no rash promises. When the ninth day comes, I shall decide on my conduct.’

‘Do you mean that you will come fishing with me for nine days? If I thought that, I fancy I should order a new suit. I am not sure, but I think I should.’

‘I would not encourage extravagance for the world. But I don’t mind going fishing with you now and then.’ She had to call out to him pretty loudly now, as he had deserted his first position, and had gone farther down the stream to try his luck elsewhere.

The sluice of the mill-stream had grown old and rotten. It had been trembling to its fall for some time past. The heavy rains of the previous day had given the finishing touch, and with a sudden crash, a dull rattling, it gave way, and down came the water with a rush. Onward it came to where Katherine stood, half-frightened, yet hardly understanding—not the danger, certainly, because there was little, but—the discomfort of her position, until the water, covering the stone and rising to her feet, showed it to her.

‘Sir Mark!’ she cried eagerly.

He had followed his line down the stream, and was unconscious of her situation.

‘Sir Mark!’ she cried again, this time more loudly; and, looking up, he saw what had happened, and ran to her assistance. The water had overflowed the banks on either side, and the jump that had been so happily performed a few minutes since was now totally impracticable.

‘After all, I shall have to carry you over this time,’ he could not resist saying, though troubled that the mishap should have befallen her.

‘But you cannot come in,’ cried Katherine in dismay; ‘you will be wet up to your waist, and——’

‘What matter?’ said he valiantly, taking off his coat.

‘But indeed, Sir Mark, I cannot allow it. If you go to the mill, the old man will send some one to my relief.’

‘And in the meantime you will stay there catching your death of cold? You must think me either very delicate or very chicken-hearted to allow that,’ said Sir Mark, who had already entered the water, and was wading towards her.

The water near the stone rose high—quite as high as she had predicted. As he reached her, he took her in his arms.

‘Tuck your dress well round you,’ he said, ‘or it will get into the water, and don’t stir, and I will take you safely. Now, supposing you were the miller’s daughter, what an infinitely more difficult task this would be than it is at present! How light you are!’

‘Do you say that with a view to self-support?’ asked

Katherine, unable to resist laughing at the absurdity of the whole affair.

‘No, indeed. I should not mind carrying you so—for ever.’

‘I should mind it very much,’ retorted Katherine. And then the dry ground was reached, and she was gently placed upon it.

‘Your poor little feet,’ said Sir Mark, regarding the wet boots that covered her tiny feet with much compassion, ‘what can I do for them?’

‘Oh, look at yourself!’ cried Katherine. ‘You are dripping! You will certainly catch your death of cold. Do not think of me—I am comparatively comfortable, compared with you. Think only of yourself.’

‘I could not do that, Katherine,’ asserted the young man, feeling he would gladly go in again, even up to his chin, if by so doing he could earn permission to kiss the exquisite pitying face raised so tenderly to his. ‘No; the question is—shall we make for the mill, or run home?’

‘Run home,’ said Katherine; ‘it is not so very far, and I do not think the miller’s Sunday clothes would be becoming to either you or me.’

Whereupon they started, and ran for a considerable way through the meadows, scarcely heeding their wet garments, so blithely danced the blood in their young veins.

‘I don’t think you will come fishing with me again,’ said Sir Mark, when they stopped to recover breath. ‘When we started this morning, you little thought there was such a treat in store for you.’

‘And where are my trout?’ asked Katherine, with a comical smile.

‘Did I not say I should catch none?’ retorted he, with a shrug. ‘But you must admit it was accident, not want of skill, that came between me and fortune to-day.’

‘There is always something. If that sluice had never given way, I believe you would have the same story to tell.’

‘I scorn your insinuations,’ said he; ‘but here we are at the house. Now run upstairs directly and change your things, while I beg pardon and the use of his wardrobe from Mr. Blount.’

At the Manor they always dined early—that is, about five o’clock; after which, between eight and nine, there was regularly laid out a certain meal called ‘tea’—the most delightfully

unceremonious, agreeable meal any one could possibly conceive. All formality was expressly forbidden, everybody took care of himself, and tea and coffee, fruit, cold meat, and steaming tea-cakes were blended together in the happiest confusion. During the summer months it was well known throughout the neighbourhood that at this particular hour the Blounts were more pleased than at any other time to see their visitors, and many were the merry meetings that took place at the old Manor while the warm weather lasted.

Sir Mark, being only too glad of any opportunity that brought him to Miss Blount's side, was in the habit of coming over at least four nights in every week from Warrenne Hall to receive a cup of coffee, and watch Katherine's delicate hands as they moved merrily here and there amongst the gilded china. This summer had been remarkably wet and cold—so much so that the following season, as though ashamed of its comrade's churlishness, had shone out with unusual splendour; and, though it was now the middle of September, the weather was so warm and bright and sunny that one could easily imagine July to have gone astray from its natural place, and turned up again in the heart of brown-tinged autumn.

Warrenne—who had arrived at that unsatisfactory stage of his love-affair when a man feels restless and generally uneasy if debarred from a sight of his divinity for a whole day—had strolled over this evening from his own place, a walk of about two miles and a half through the surrounding woods and intermediate fields, to see Miss Blount. At her garden gate he met her just setting out for a distant paddock to criticise a certain colt, which she fondly hoped might prove 'after her own heart.'

Now Katherine was at all times slightly peculiar in the point of dress—a peculiarity that at intervals might almost be called odd, not to say fantastical; and to-night, about an hour before Sir Mark's arrival, feeling tired and listless with nothing to do—Blackwood having gone out after dinner to a neighbouring farm upon some business of his uncle's—she had gone upstairs to an old lumber room, when, poking here and there in a vague, unthinking manner, she had come suddenly upon a rich black satin dress of her mother's—fresh and good, certainly, but extremely old-fashioned—which had at once taken her girlish fancy.

She tried it on; it fitted to perfection, almost as though it

had been made expressly for her, and, having been originally intended for full dress, leaving the arms and neck quite bare, seemed the very thing for such a warm, enervating evening as the present.

She would go downstairs and see what Blackwood would say to her when he returned; and, passing through the garden, she stopped to decorate her hair and neck and belt with some pieces of brilliant scarlet geranium, coming directly, almost immediately afterwards, upon Sir Mark Warrenne, in all her new-found bravery.

For a moment the young man was silent, and could do nothing but stare at her, so beautiful a vision did she appear to him just then, with her gleaming white neck and arms, and delicate laughing face. No matter how old the dress might be, no matter how ancient and out of date, it suited her, its very antiquity only serving to show her off more clearly in the mellow, softening twilight, as one of the very daintiest, sweetest, fairest creatures that ever adorned this earth. His fixed gaze brought a faint blush to her soft cheeks; she came hurriedly forward and held out her hand.

‘It is you,’ she said simply, but in a tone of unmistakable welcome. He took her hand and held it fast, but still made no answer, being fully occupied in trying to account for the alteration in her appearance. Presently, having submitted to his scrutiny very quietly for a few moments, she spoke again, half coquettishly, half confusedly this time.

‘Have you nothing to say to me?’

‘Yes, I have plenty,’ Warrenne answered, still puzzled, but drawing himself up as though to shake off, or at least loosen, the spell that was closing round him, ‘but somehow to-night you are a little different, I fancy—you are changed. Oh’—with a relieved look and a feeling of inspiration—‘you have a new dress on, have you not?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ Katherine exclaimed, with a merry, ringing laugh; ‘it is as old as the hills, and has, I am afraid, frightened you. Am I looking very hideous then, or what is it that you stare at me so strangely? Why, I thought’—moving a few yards away from him, and glancing back over her shoulder with indescribable grace at the long trailing skirt behind her—‘I fancied that, in spite of my smallness, I was looking the very personification of dignity.’

‘You are looking only too lovely,’ Warrenne told her, coming over to her side, and speaking in a tone of such warm

undeniable admiration that the girl could scarcely fail to feel pleased; while at the same moment an intense mad longing arose in his heart to catch her in his arms—an extremely foolish, not to say reprehensible proceeding, which he refrained from putting into execution. ‘You were going for a walk, Miss Blount,’ he said presently. ‘May I come with you?’

‘I am going down to the off-paddock to see the new colt,’ she answered, ‘and you may come with me if you like.’ After which gracious permission on the part of the majestic little lady, they sauntered along together through the soft velvety grass.

On one side of them rose a tall quick-set hedge, which effectually shielded from their view a narrow gravelled path that wound its secluded way directly to the house, and from which, about a hundred yards farther on, one had access by a rustic stile in a breach in the hedge into the field where they now were. When they had come to within about fifty paces of this stile, Miss Blount stopped suddenly, and glanced up at her companion with a half-amused smile.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘My shoe,’ she answered; ‘it has come undone—the string is loose; and if I go another step it will certainly come off altogether.’

‘Let me fasten it for you,’ Sir Mark proposed gravely; and Miss Blount having murmured that he was ‘very good,’ he forthwith went down on his knees and took her beautiful little foot almost reverently in his hand.

It so happened that just at this moment, as ill-luck would have it, Blackwood Craven was returning by the small gravelled walk from seeing after his uncle’s business, and as he stepped on to the stile, preparatorily to entering the field, with the fond hope in his heart, poor fellow! that he should somewhere near the garden meet his cousin Katherine, the following tableau met his eyes.

Sir Mark Warrenne was kneeling on the grass, his fair handsome head bent over Miss Blount’s foot as it rested on his knee, while she was steadying herself comfortably by leaning her hand on the stooping Baronet’s shoulder. The shoe took a very long—in fact, a remarkably long—time to fasten; either Sir Mark was unused to such tasks—as most probably he was—and therefore was awkward in accomplishing it, or else he found his occupation the most agreeable he had ever undertaken, and wished to linger over it. Who shall decide?

Certain it is, however, that two whole minutes elapsed before it was considered safe for Miss Blount to place her foot upon the ground once more ; and, when at length it was pronounced ready, Sir Mark, as though unwilling to part with it without rendering it homage, bent down and pressed his lips most fervently to the dainty stocking that covered the high-arched instep.

Miss Blount first frowned at this little act on the young man's part, after which she smiled and murmured a demure little 'Thank you !' and then Blackwood Craven, with a groan that was half a curse, dropped down from the stile—whereon he had been sitting quite unobserved by the other two—and advanced rapidly to meet them. The passionate pride of his nature stood him in good stead here, blanching his whole face certainly, but leaving his smile as unembarrassed and pleasant as usual.

'Good-evening, Warrenne,' he said carelessly, holding out his hand. 'I fancied somehow all day that you would be down this evening. I want to speak to you by-and-by about that pointer of yours. Going to see "the Duke," Katherine ? I hurried back as quickly as I could to accompany you, but now you have Sir Mark it doesn't matter ; and it happens very well, as I have some letters to write. But'—with a smile—'do not be longer than you can help, dear, as I want my coffee badly, and, besides, the dew is beginning to fall heavily.' With which little brotherly speech, and a parting kindly touch upon her shoulder, he went on his way, to all outward seeming perfectly composed.

Perhaps he imposed upon Sir Mark—future events proved that he did, more or less—but on his cousin he certainly did not. She had known him too long not to understand by this time what alone could whiten his brave, handsome face, or cause the hand that rested on her arm when passing to burn with such a dry, throbbing heat.

In a moment her whole mood changed ; she could no longer chatter and laugh with the man beside her ; Blackwood's face interposed, and seemed to forbid it ; she felt cold and chilled, and wickedly inclined towards the world in general. She hated Sir Mark, simply because he had offered most kindly to tie her shoe, and she could find nothing else against him just then ; she hated the innocent colt that had been the primary cause of all this mischief ; she hated herself, in that she had allowed Warrenne to hold her foot for even one

moment in his hand, and to kiss it—pah ! how hateful seemed now the thing that had appeared so harmless a few minutes before !—and she hated Blackwood, because—ah, no ! not Blackwood, above all people. Heaven alone knew how little hatred she cherished in her heart for him.

‘What are you thinking of ?’ her companion asked presently, beginning to wonder at the protracted silence.

‘Of many things,’ she answered vaguely, not to say unpleasantly. But Sir Mark, being perfectly unsuspecting of having offended her in any way, detected no warning in her voice, and went on unwittingly to his undoing.

‘Tell me one of them, Tita,’ he said tenderly, so compromising himself as absolutely as mortal man could do so.

‘Tita’ was her pet name, given to her by Blackwood, and one of her own choosing : it was used by him always, no ‘outsiders’ being ever permitted to address her by this sobriquet, Harry Charteris alone excepted, she indeed being deemed worthy to share with him the right of using this title. To hear Sir Mark, therefore, who was a comparative stranger, and who besides had been the cause of all that heart-burning a moment ago, using it now, stung her to the quick. She turned upon him instantly, imperiously.

‘Do not address me in that manner,’ she said. ‘Who gave you permission to call me “Tita” ? Not I, certainly ! Never dare to do it again.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ Warrenne replied, just a little haughtily, feeling and looking considerably astonished at this outbreak, as well he might. ‘I had no idea you would have any objection. Will you tell me what I may call you then—“Katherine” ?’

‘I think perhaps “Miss Blount” will be best,’ she answered, with extreme *hauteur*, born either of her ruffled temper or the new-found satin train that rustled majestically behind her.

After this agreeable finish to their conversation the remainder of their walk was decidedly the reverse of pleasant, being passed in utter silence ; and it was not until they were safely seated at the tea-table that Katherine once more recovered her usual spirits. Having succeeded in making Sir Mark quite as miserable as a man could well be, she changed her tactics most unexpectedly, and raised him in a short time to a far higher realm of bliss than he had ever yet dreamt of so that when tea was finished, and they all broke up to

go their different ways, Warrenne followed Miss Blount through the pretty comfortable drawing-room into an adjoining old-world apartment—empty, waxed, and wainscoted—until they found themselves alone in the embrasure of a large oak-panelled window, that opened casement fashion, and through which the white glimmering moon shone down upon their faces.

The hour and situation were ‘sentimental,’ to say the least of it, and Katherine, leaning back in her favourite attitude against the shutter, with soft silver moonbeams lighting up her black dress and fair warm loveliness, looked almost unearthly in her extreme beauty.

‘Katherine,’ said Sir Mark, in a low impassioned tone, and without a word of preface, ‘I love you. Will you marry me?’

Miss Blount, not dreaming that for the next few months at least he would come to the last scene in his drama, was astonished; she raised her eyes, and gazed with mute bewilderment upon her latest lover, but answer she found none.

‘Darling,’ Warrenne went on, possessing himself of both her hands and speaking quickly, vehemently, ‘it is soon, I know, to tell you this; but I love you, and waiting *years* could not increase my love. I hold you in my heart as I never yet held any woman—for I place my whole future happiness humbly at your feet. Will you not speak to me, Katherine, and hold out to me some hope?’

Miss Blount withdrew her hands, and sat down on the deep old-fashioned window-seat; it seemed very hard to her just then to tell this man who looked so terribly in earnest that he could never be anything more to her than a mere friend.

‘I am sorry,’ she began faintly, but he interrupted her hurriedly.

‘Do not begin like that!’ he implored. ‘Do not answer me now at all, Katherine, but take a little time to think, before you decide on telling me what must render my entire life either intensely happy or unspeakably bitter. Take until to-morrow; and promise me that you will not condemn me hastily, but will for one night at least reflect on what I have said.’

Archibald Blount was coming slowly towards them through the long room, on which the darkness seemed to Mark Warrenne to have fallen heavily, and the girl had only just time to whisper, ‘I promise you,’ when he came up to them.

‘What! Going so soon, Sir Mark?’ he exclaimed, with his pleasant, well-bred smile. ‘Have I frightened you away? Well, good-night; you have a charming evening for your walk;’ and he shook the young man heartily by the hand, while he formed in the same moment, at a glance, a pretty accurate estimate of how matters stood.

‘Katherine,’ he said, when Sir Mark was fairly gone, ‘will you come into my study before you go to bed, and copy out a business letter for me? I am so sick of writing myself.’

‘I will be with you in one instant,’ Miss Blount answered, as he turned to seek his private apartment again, whither she followed him shortly afterwards, only pausing to say a passing word to Blackwood as she encountered him in the hall.

‘Where are you off to, Tita?’ he asked kindly, stopping the little black-robed figure as it was flitting past him.

‘To copy a letter for papa. And you are going, I suppose, to smoke a last cigar? Well, in that case, I will bid you good-night now, Blackwood, as I dare say I shall not see you again.’

‘Good-night, my love,’ he answered very sadly, holding her hands fast for a moment, as though undecided as to whether or not he would ask her a question that lay very close to his heart to-night; but after an instant’s reflection he resolved to be silent, and, dropping her hands suddenly, went on his way with a quick, impatient sigh.

‘I will be true to him,’ the girl murmured with loving earnestness to herself, as she went into the study and sat down to write out the letter Archibald Blount laid before her.

CHAPTER IV.

It certainly did strike Katherine, while occupied upon it, that the business matter contained in the sheet before her was by no means worth the trouble of copying; but she went on steadily with her task nevertheless, until she had reached the end and signed the name, when her father suddenly broke in upon the silence by saying—

‘Did Sir Mark Warrenne propose for you this evening, Katherine?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, raising her eyes and wondering what was coming next.

‘And you—what did you say?’ Archibald asked, gently as ever, although it was with difficulty he restrained the nervous trembling of his voice, as he remembered the young man’s hasty departure and his daughter’s well-known impulsiveness. Good Heavens! Could it be possible that she had been mad enough to refuse him?

‘He asked me to wait until to-morrow before I gave him a decided answer,’ the girl replied in a low, clear tone; ‘so of course I said I would; but when to-morrow does come I shall certainly refuse him.’

‘Just so,’ Mr. Blount said quietly, almost dreamily. Yet a heavy load seemed lifted from his heart, and he roused himself to breathe more freely, and to put into execution a little plot he had been cherishing whereby to change the current of his daughter’s intentions; but first he would try what argument could do. ‘Of course, that is quite your own affair, and I dare say you have your reasons,’ he went on in the careless, uninterested tones in which one might address an utter stranger, when seeing him going wilfully and blindly on the road to destruction—‘quite your own look-out from beginning to end; but why you have taken it into your usually clear head to refuse Sir Mark Warrenne I cannot conceive. He is well-bred, handsome, and as honourable a young fellow as one could meet with, besides being extremely well off, and indeed in every respect a most suitable match for your beauty. What is your reason?’

‘I do not love him,’ Katherine declared decisively, knitting her brows and looking straight before her.

‘You do not—what?’ Archibald asked in a tone of mingled incredulity and wonder, almost comical in its perfect astonishment, that to a mere looker-on must have appeared infinitely amusing. In truth, he was as intensely amused himself as it was in his nature to be. That anybody should allow such a secondary consideration as love to interfere with the possession of fourteen thousand a year seemed to Archibald Blount about as comical an idea as he had ever heard.

‘I do not love him,’ his daughter repeated, if possible more firmly this time, still with a frown on her fair forehead and the same steady look into space.

‘Now is my time,’ thought her companion, changing his

position as well as his tactics, and facing her with a look upon his face she had never before beheld there.

‘Katherine,’ he began very earnestly, ‘I had hoped there would never have been any necessity for my telling you what I am now about to disclose ; but, seeing that you are wilfully, and for no earthly reason, about to throw away a chance that Providence alone could have sent you just now, I think it only my duty to tell you the fact that, unless within three months I get some help, this house with all it contains will be sold above my head, leaving you and me beggars upon the face of the earth.’

‘Papa !’ Miss Blount ejaculated faintly, every particle of blood receding from her face.

Her father had risen from his seat at the conclusion of his speech, and was now pacing rapidly up and down the polished boards of the library, seemingly in deep agitation. And without doubt he was agitated—more so than even he himself could have conceived possible at the beginning of the conversation—though from a very different cause from that which he had described to Miss Blount.

The old Manor was as secure over his head now as it had been at any time for the last ten years, which certainly was not saying much for it, Archibald being quite unable to remember the time when he had been free from debt ; but the idea of this girl, for the sake of a mere whim, allowing fourteen thousand a year to slip through her fingers, made his very blood run cold.

‘You alone could have saved me,’ he went on, heedless of her faint interruption ; ‘with the knowledge of your husband’s wealth, my creditors would have become less importunate. I should have gained time ; and Sir Mark, I have no doubt, could have given me some necessary assistance. But, if you cannot say “Yes” to the truest gentleman I know, of course there is little more to be said. It is a subject upon which I should not dream of coercing you, but for your own sake, if not for mine, reflect before it proves too late. If I sink, you must of necessity sink with me, as we both sail in the same boat ; but for me it makes less difference, my sands being nearly run, though I confess it does seem hard to commence my life again with my grey hairs.’

The last was a skilful touch. Miss Blount rose, pale and in deep distress. It was odd, now that the nerves of both were unstrung, what a wonderful likeness existed between the father and daughter.

'What can have happened?' she asked, her voice trembling painfully. 'Has it really gone so far as to be beyond hope? Can nothing be done to save you?'

'Nothing,' her father answered, with just the proper amount of heart-broken sadness in his intonation—the man was a consummate actor in his own quiet self-possessed way. 'If you will not, or cannot help me, I am indeed hopeless. However, I think more sadly of your fate than of my own, Katherine, as I am only an old man now, without many years of life before me, and with few things to wish for, beyond a great longing to die in my childhood's home, while you are strong and youthful, and have many days before you. Useless lamenting, however, does small good, I have heard; so we will say no more about it—*che sarà, sarà*, and perhaps'—with a faint melancholy smile—'it will not be for long. Death is sometimes very merciful.'

'Oh, not that, not that,' cried Katherine, stopping him suddenly in his restless promenade, and throwing unselfish, tender arms around his neck, while feeling, woman-like, now that he was cast so completely on her mercy and in such deep trouble, how infinitely dearer he was to her than he had ever been before—'not while it is in my power to prevent it! Oh, darling'—bursting into a passion of despairing tears—'I may not have been a good daughter to you till now, but only give me a little time to think, and I will do the best I can for you!'

For once in his life Archibald Blount was really touched by the unmerited, tender devotion of the daughter he had so persistently neglected.

'Katherine,' he whispered gently, holding her very closely to him, and feeling at the moment some faint, long-forgotten sensations arising in his degenerate bosom for the tender clinging creature in his arms, 'if you can do this thing, you will be giving me what I shall bless you for to the day of my death; but I hardly dare to ask it—what is my happiness in comparison with yours? Remember, I have seen my best days, yours are yet to come; and, believe me, but that I know you to be heart-whole, I would not press the matter so perseveringly. You are heart-whole, Katherine—you do not love any one else?'

'No, I do not love any one else,' Miss Blount answered bravely; but as she told the lie she covered her face with her hands, and turned away, feeling faint and sick and cold.

Presently she raised her head. 'Let me go now,' she said; 'I want to be alone. Good-night, papa.'

'Good-night, my dear,' he returned, pressing his lips to hers with more than his wonted fervour, as he felt his cause was gained.

When she was gone, and the last glimpse of her dress had disappeared through the door, Archibald Blount raised himself, and drew a long deep breath. He was too well-bred and refined a man ever to exult openly in any triumph, however great, but his eyes looked brighter, and his step sounded more firmly as he walked.

'Poor little girl,' he murmured half absently to himself, as he lit his bed-room lamp. 'I wonder if she cares at all for Craven. I hope she does not—from my soul I hope she does not;' after which touching hopefulness on his part he went upstairs and into bed, where he slept long and peacefully.

Not so did the 'poor little girl.' Arrived in her own bedroom, Katherine Blount locked the door, and, without removing ornaments or any article of dress, walked towards the window, and leaned her beautiful shapely head against the dew-cold glass.

The moon was shining on her, pale and placid; the dazzling twinkling stars gleamed down upon the silent earth; a strange, sweet night it seemed, filled with a sadness responsive to her own, that almost entreated confidence; but Katherine neither moved, nor moaned, nor wept.

With dull, unnatural calmness she went over the whole night's events, weighing one thing against another, until all appeared quite clear. Once only she lifted her head in silent protest to the starry heavens, murmuring desperately, 'I cannot;' but before the rebellious words were fairly uttered she knew herself how worthless they were. After that she covered her face, and, kneeling down upon the ground, went deliberately through the many happy scenes and tender recollections of her one love-story, in which Blackwood Craven shone out brightly and alone; with bitter remorse she remembered now how often she had bestowed a frown, a hasty, unkind word, where it would have been so easy, so much more true to her real nature, to confer a caress or a considerate speech. Never again could she make amends for all her past deliberate cruelties. Ah, if she had but known!

So the hours passed—swiftly enough to the girl who, with dry eyes and burning brain, was bidding an eternal farewell to

the sacred romance of her youth—heavily enough no doubt to those who sat and watched their sacred dead. Presently one by one the stars paled, and in their place came faintest streaks of crimson in the distant east, betokening gloriously the coming morn. Katherine rose from her knees, and, flinging wide the casement, as though to gain some air, glanced longingly upwards towards the rising sun; and as she looked, lo, all the warmth of heaven came pouring down, and darkness lightened into golden day!

With the dawn came her determination. Turning slowly away from the open window, through which a lark's loud song of praise rushed with tumultuous music, she moved with stiffened limbs across the room, her poor heart torn and bleeding.

The next morning Sir Mark Warrenne went home rejoicing, the accepted lover of beautiful Katherine Blount, while his lady-love fulfilled her daily duties with pallid face and clouded eyes, and thoughts 'all void of soul.' Blackwood she had not seen all day, having excused herself from breakfast on the plea of nervous headache—not all excuse—but, coming suddenly into the old parlour, some little time before dinner, she discovered Blackwood sitting there, busily employed making cartridges for the morrow's shooting. For a second her courage failed her completely, but only for a second; then she rallied her spirits and came forward, speaking bravely enough, though in tones strangely dull and unlike her usual voice, which was sweet and musical.

'Blackwood, I want to tell you something.'

Her manner startled him; he flung down the unfinished cartridge, the contents of which ran swiftly, with a tiny rattling noise, from off the table down about the oaken floor, while a terrible sense of impending evil half choked him, his face blanching, in the fashion peculiar to him when anything unpleasant about Katherine came under his notice.

'What is it?' he asked shortly.

'I have promised to marry Sir Mark Warrenne,' she answered, just as shortly, trying wildly to appear unconcerned, but failing wretchedly.

For a full minute Blackwood Craven went mad—as mad as the veriest lunatic that ever trod the floors of Bedlam. He strode forward, and seized her small wrists with cruel vehemence, almost crushing the tender bones in his passionate grasp.

'Say that again!' he cried fiercely, threateningly; while

'Blackwood, Blackwood!' was all poor Katherine could gasp, with faint supplication. Presently, however, the paroxysm passed, leaving him sane, but despairing; he dropped her hands hurriedly, the iron had entered into his soul, and at the first cold touch the madness fled. He turned to the window quietly.

'Has it come to this at last?' he said.

Miss Blount sank into a chair, and for a short time there was a dead silence in the room, during which they scarcely seemed to breathe. To Katherine the stillness was intolerable; any open torture would have been less bitter. At all hazards she felt she must see his face again; so, stealing over to his side, she placed a timid, trembling hand upon his arm.

'Blackwood, have some pity!' she whispered beseechingly, raising to his face great lustrous pleading eyes.

'Pity!' he echoed contemptuously, shaking off her hand as though it scorched his flesh, and moving backwards a few steps. 'Pity for what? Because you are going to marry the richest man in the county, and a baronet into the bargain, or because you have wisely thrown over the man who was imbecile enough to imagine he possessed your extremely saleable affections—which? My pity would be rather wasted, I fancy, were I to bestow it on you, so I will reserve any I may have for Sir Mark Warrenne, as I do not know any of my acquaintances so much in need of it as he is just now. Meanwhile I beg to offer you my warmest congratulations on your success and approaching happiness.'

'Blackwood,' the girl began vehemently, stung to the quick by his insinuations, but endeavouring eagerly, with tightly clenched hands, to speak with calmness, 'will you not listen to me? I swear——'

'Hush!' he interrupted her sternly, with cold cruel scorn, putting up his hand to prevent her speaking farther, 'you need not perjure yourself any more—it is unnecessary. I am scarcely in a condition, you see, to believe the remainder of your protestations. You have said quite enough to last me my lifetime, so I will not trouble you with my presence any longer. I leave with you what must be a pleasant reflection—the knowledge that you have utterly ruined my existence.'

'Are you going?' Katherine gasped. 'For how long?'

'For ever,' he answered briefly, turning towards the door as he spoke.

Just for one moment Miss Blount felt stunned—crushed—

and then, with a bitter cry, she roused herself and tried to reach him, but found she could not—some power within her numbed her limbs, and left her without strength to move. Her love, her life, was going, but she could only hold out her hands to him in passionate, wild entreaty.

‘Blackwood, Blackwood,’ she implored, ‘do not leave me like this! Say something to me before you go!’

He turned as he reached the threshold, to gaze his last upon the exquisite agonised face he loved so dearly, and the tender arms outheld in pitiful, mute supplication. But even then he did not relent.

‘I will,’ he said, with vehement bitterness. ‘As you ask it, you can take this as my “good-bye”—remember the last words I said to you were these—“I curse the day I ever saw you.”’ So, with black anger at his heart, he passed out from the house that had been his pleasant home from childhood, a despairing, broken-hearted man, leaving the woman who was to him the dearest being on earth in a dead, cold swoon, her soft brown hair sweeping the polished floor.

CHAPTER V

WHEN October had come, and was well-nigh gone, Katherine Blount married Sir Mark Warrenne, and went for a three months’ wedding tour to Italy.

From the hour of Blackwood’s abrupt departure the girl had faded perceptibly, without any visible cause. With a terrible longing she waited for many weeks for some word or token from her cousin which should soften the bitterness of his last cruel farewell, but no letter came; and day by day, as it seemed to Sir Mark’s anxious gaze—he being perfectly ignorant of the fatal attachment existing between his promised wife and Blackwood Craven—she appeared to be slowly, but surely, sinking into confirmed ill-health. So he pleaded earnestly for an early wedding, that should give him the right to take her away for some time to other scenes and climates, and so bring back the roses to his darling’s cheeks.

Miss Blount, in the usual listless manner that had of late become habitual to the once gay little beauty, consented, after a faint but ineffectual demur, and named the dreaded day that

should for ever cut her off from all thought of Blackwood Craven, after which she endured in her own heart a silent purgatory, invisible to those around her, but which paralysed her and seemed to drain her life-blood drop by drop.

Harriet Charteris alone, with a woman's true instinct, guessed exactly how matters stood, and would have striven with all her might to comfort and console the girl she so well loved had not Miss Blount's distant, cold demeanour forbidden any attempts at probing her hidden wound.

Once only had Harriet made a faint effort to advise or console, an effort which, as she had dreaded, resulted in nothing but signal failure. It was one morning about a fortnight before the day arranged for the wedding, and Miss Blount had ridden over to consult her friend on some trivial matter with regard to it; she had stayed a considerable time even after the communication had been made and an answer received, in a rather more restless, impatient mood than was habitual even with her, and Harriet, who was possessed of a nature both true and loyal to the heart's core, and who loved well when she loved at all, had worked herself into a state of misery indescribable.

In like manner the children, having guessed—with the wonderful unerring instinct of childhood—that something was amiss with their favourite Katherine, had abstained from their usual wild merriment, to sit beside her, and slip their tiny hands within her own in silent sympathy, with wide-open questioning eyes, that touched the girl's excited feelings more keenly than any offered consolation could have done, and nearly broke her aching heart.

She got up at last, moving away from them to the window, where she watched with burning tearless eyes the weary waste of falling autumn leaves which stretched before her.

Mrs. Charteris, seeing all this in her anxious, compassionate watchfulness, had waved the boys from the room with a covert motion of the hand, and then gone over to where Miss Blount was standing.

'Katherine,' she said, in a soft low soothing tone, 'my dear, dear girl, tell me, do you regret anything?'

Miss Blount turned suddenly, almost defiantly.

'No, I regret nothing,' she replied; after which, although presently she changed her mood and kissed Mrs. Charteris silently, with tears in her beautiful eyes, the latter understood perfectly that no more words were to be said on the subject.

About the end of January Sir Mark and Lady Warrenne returned to the Hall, which, by the Baronet's orders, had been magnificently restored during their absence, things having gone more or less to decay during all those years that he had spent wandering in Italy and elsewhere.

Mrs. Charteris was delighted to find her friend considerably changed for the better. She had gained flesh, had brought back a brighter colour in her fair face, and would have been altogether quite like the Katherine of old but for her eyes. In them lay perpetually a weary, dissatisfied, hopeless expression, that told but too clearly how comfortless was the heart within.

She clung to Harriet when they first met after their long separation, and burst into a passion of tears that frightened the latter a good deal ; after which she told her, with a rather wintry smile, that she ought to be flattered at the amount of affection she entertained for her, as shown by the fact that she found it impossible to go away for a few months without behaving like a baby when they met again ; all which had the effect of making Mrs. Charteris feel very sad and doubtful, and doubly tender that evening to the husband and children that awaited her.

It so happened that two weeks after their return Sir Mark had occasion to go to London for a day. Katherine not caring to accompany him, he went on his short journey alone ; and, as he was strolling leisurely down Regent Street to execute some trifling commission for his wife, whom should he meet, face to face, but Blackwood Craven, looking changed and careworn beyond description.

The two men met with an expression of cordiality that, on one side, was by no means genuine, although Sir Mark, who was naturally of a most kindly, open-hearted disposition, was unfeignedly glad to meet his old acquaintance again.

'Why, Craven,' he exclaimed heartily, 'who would have dreamed of seeing you here ? I heard from Blount that you were stationed somewhere in the south.'

'I got a few weeks' leave,' Blackwood returned listlessly, 'and, having nothing better to do, thought I would knock about London a bit, and see some of my old friends.'

'I'll tell you what to do,' said Sir Mark. 'Come down with me to the Hall, and I will promise you as good shooting as ever you had—you cannot do better. And my wife will be delighted to see you—you and she were always so intimate, you know.'

‘His wife!’ Blackwood’s face paled in the old manner, and he winced almost perceptibly. ‘His wife!’ ‘Glad to see him!’ Had she then been discussing his misery? Could she really be so indifferent to him as all that?

‘Thank you,’ he said coldly, ‘but I don’t fancy I can manage it.’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ Warrenne broke in hospitably. ‘You can manage it easily enough, so say “Yes” at once, and meet me at the down train this evening. We will take Katherine by surprise, and make her perfectly happy—seeing you will remind her so of old times; besides, the change of air will do you all the good in the world.’

Every word thus unconsciously uttered was a stab to the bleeding heart of Blackwood Craven, and inwardly he writhed under Sir Mark’s comments with an agony beyond all physical pain. Old times, old memories, tender by-gone scenes rose up before him, only to give place to the remembrance that she was his no longer, but the happy contented wife of this man who stood waiting for an answer; and then a wild, half-frantic desire to see her once more—in her new home—in her character of a married woman—took possession of him, driving away all other wiser thoughts and resolves.

‘Well, thank you,’ he decided suddenly; ‘yes, I will come. You are right; it will do me an infinite amount of good to see all my favourite haunts again; so you may expect to see me at the station.’

‘That’s right,’ Sir Mark answered, real pleasure shining in his handsome blue eyes, as he contemplated Katherine’s astonishment and delight. ‘Good-bye then for the present; and do not be late, old man, whatever you do.’

So it came to pass that Blackwood Craven actually started that night to spend some days under Katherine Warrenne’s roof. The weather was bitterly cold, frost and snow lying heavily upon the ground, as they drove along to Warrenne Hall, but he scarcely seemed to heed it; the whole journey appeared to him like some exciting dream that would vanish presently, and leave him in his own quarters in London, far enough from the Hall and its inhabitants.

It was not until they drew up at the Hall door, and Sir Mark advised him to alight, ‘unless he had any fancy for being frozen to death,’ that he fully awoke to the reality of the situation.

‘Come along,’ Sir Mark exclaimed eagerly, when the

servant informed him where her ladyship was to be found. 'Come along, Craven—Barnet will see to your gun-case.'

At this juncture Blackwood's heart began to fail him horribly. How would she meet him? he asked himself hurriedly. Would she faint? Would she show any agitation? Or would she——

'Warrenne,' he said, stopping short, and endeavouring to speak with unconcern, 'would it not be better perhaps to tell Lady Warrenne that—that I am come?'

'Oh, nonsense, man!' returned Sir Mark, with a half-smile of astonishment, pausing to contemplate his companion unsuspiciously. 'You do not suppose she requires the news to be broken to her, do you—you, who were almost a brother? Come on.'

So after this, there being no help for it, Craven, with a smothered groan, followe'd his guide into a small elegant apartment, where, at the farthest end, sat busily embroidering the woman he loved. Lady Warrenne did not perceive him until she had returned her husband's embrace, when Sir Mark said pleasantly—

'Katherine, I have brought you your oldest friend;' and she, looking up curiously, gazed straight into Blackwood Craven's eyes.

For a moment—for just one brief moment of agony—she thought she was going to faint, to disgrace herself for ever in her own and her husband's opinion; and then she found herself moving forward, and saying something commonplace to Blackwood about his being welcome, and so forth—what exactly she could never afterwards remember. A cloud seemed gathering round her, choking, suffocating her in its cold embrace, from beyond which her husband's voice came to her, true and loving as ever—

'We are starving, my darling; can Brander give us something if I ring the bell?'

'I will go and see myself,' she said, catching eagerly and gladly at the chance thus afforded her of getting away from the room, and from the one man whom, in all the world, she dreaded.

For half an hour she was absent, which time she employed in walking wildly up and down her own chamber, trying anxiously to collect her ideas and to conquer the fierce pain gnawing so persistently at her heart.

'I have saved my father,' she kept repeating to herself

over and over again, until she had grown tolerably calm ; then she went back again to the obnoxious boudoir, only to find that Sir Mark and her cousin had gone down to the dining-room to discuss the good things Brander had thought fit to place before them. Thither she also descended—nervous, lest either of them should notice anything unusual in her conduct—and, taking a chair near her husband's side, as far from Blackwood as was possible, she tried hard to say something civil and pleasant about their journey.

‘It would have been lonely enough without Craven,’ Sir Mark told her, ‘although I can scarcely cry him up as the jolliest companion in all the world, considering that he never opened his lips the entire way. And—would you believe it, Katherine?—it was quite as much as I could do to induce him to grant us the pleasure of his society, even for a few days. I told him I would complain of his conduct to you, and throw him on the tender mercies of a woman's tongue. But,’ he broke off somewhat anxiously, ‘are you feeling quite strong to-night, my dearest? Your cheeks have lost all the bright colour they gained in Italy. Did you go for your drive this afternoon?’

‘Yes ; I went to see Harry,’ Katherine answered, ignoring the beginning of his speech, ‘but the day was bleak, and I felt cold—so cold’—tightening her hands nervously. ‘I think I will bid you good-night now, and go to my room, as it is rather late’—rising as she concluded, and holding out her hand to Craven. ‘Good-night, Blackwood,’ she said quite calmly, but without raising her eyes to meet his ; and, having pressed her lips to Sir Mark's forehead, she went quietly away.

During his stay at the Hall Craven saw but little of Lady Warrenne, he and Sir Mark going shooting, or being otherwise engaged out of doors the entire day until dinner-time, after which Katherine avoided—with a heedfulness that almost amounted to nervous horror—anything resembling a *tête-à-tête*. Nor, to tell the truth, was Blackwood by any means desirous to obtain one.

From the first moment when Katherine's beautiful idolised face had come before him again in the boudoir, he had never ceased regretting the step that had brought him once more under her influence, and longed earnestly for the hour that should see him back in London again, or with his regiment, or anywhere, so that he might get beyond the gaze of her large unhappy eyes. At last the mental torture he was enduring

became so unbearable that he determined to end it one way or another, and, after passing a sleepless night, came to the conclusion that the next day—his fifth—should be the last of his residence at Warrenne Hall.

Having made up his mind to this, he determined to say nothing of his intention until the morning of his departure, when he would find some excuse in his letters to leave by the early train, which started about an hour after the usual breakfast-time.

Feeling happier in his mind now that he had arranged his private affairs so satisfactorily, he started with Sir Mark about eleven to go through his last day's shooting at the Hall.

It was a magnificent day for the sport they had in view, though decidedly cold and bitter for all those not imbued with a passion for outdoor amusements. Having ascertained from the keeper accompanying them the nearest way to the desired rendezvous, they walked on smartly for about a quarter of a mile, when Sir Mark suddenly discovered that he was without fusees, or anything else wherewith to light his pipe. This was indeed a serious consideration, especially as Craven confessed himself in the same plight, and the keeper had evidently been depending upon the other two both for a light and tobacco.

'I will run back,' said Craven. 'Tell me where to find some, and I will overtake you in less than no time; or else I will go by the lower field and pick you up farther on.'

'Just step into the library by the French window,' directed Sir Mark, 'and you will find some on the table which I left there last night, in a little silver affair.'

Thus instructed, Blackwood betook himself back once more to the Hall, where, entering the library by the French window, he came suddenly upon Lady Warrenne, seated reading in a large arm-chair. It was the first time they had been alone since that last eventful day when he had bidden her what had been intended to be a final farewell, so that now, finding himself in her presence in this totally unexpected manner, his courage and coolness deserted him to some extent.

'I beg your pardon, Lady Warrenne,' he began, pausing a moment before entering—he had never called her 'Tita' since his arrival, nor even Katherine, confining himself to her title—'but Warrenne told me—I came back for some vesuvians of his lying on the table.'

Lady Warrenne rose gracefully.

‘Are these what you are looking for?’ she asked, lifting the little silver match-box, and holding it out to him.

‘Yes, thank you,’ he answered coldly, coming across the room to receive them from her hand.

As he did so their eyes met, and a wild, unconquerable, desire possessed Katherine to be friends with him at all hazards.

‘Blackwood, forgive me!’ she whispered gently, laying her hand upon his arm. ‘If he does,’ she thought, her heart beating rapidly—‘if he puts me now at peace with my own conscience—I will tell Mark everything this evening, and perhaps some day I shall be happy.’ Meanwhile Craven had taken the little fingers that lay like a snowflake on the coarse cloth of his shooting-jacket, and spread them out silently on his own brown palm, but not a shadow of forgiveness crossed his face.

‘Look here,’ he said; ‘so long as I can remember that this hand belongs to another man, let him be who he may, dead or alive, so long I will not forgive you.’

‘Meaning “Never,”?’ she asked quietly, growing deathly pale.

‘Meaning “Never”!’ Blackwood Craven answered, just as quietly, loosing her hand unrelentingly.

‘You are very hard on me,’ she said presently, seeing that he either could not or would not speak.

‘Hard on you!’ he repeated, with the concentrated bitterness of months in his voice. ‘How like a woman that is—first employing every artifice to gain a man’s honest affection—waiting until she discovers that his very soul is scarce his own—and then flinging him over for the first good match she can find, and, having succeeded in embittering his whole existence, thinking it “hard” that he does not turn round and humbly kiss her hand! No’—with a bitter laugh—‘you have misjudged my character. I am a good hater, most of my tender feelings having taken flight since last September; and I hardly find myself sufficiently moral to appreciate the benefits to be received by kissing the proverbial “rod.”’

‘Oh, Blackwood,’ she murmured, ‘I think you would be a little more merciful if you only knew how I have longed for your forgiveness, and how miserable I am without it!’

‘I hope in reality you are,’ he answered savagely. ‘What! Did not your riches after all, then, bring you the return you anticipated? A just retribution, and one hardly to be ex-

pected in this world, where the undeserving mostly come by their own! This is the last conversation, in all probability, I shall ever hold with you on earth, as I go away to-morrow morning early, and embark for India in another month or six weeks; so I will waste no more hard words, having let you know, once for all, the esteem in which I hold you.' As he finished speaking he walked towards the window by which he had entered.

As she saw him moving away from her, for ever, as it appeared—this man, so cruelly unkind, so deeply loved, so irreparably wronged—Lady Warrenne's heart sank within her; she burst into a storm of sobs, passionate, despairing, and made one last effort to obtain the pardon she, in her loneliness, so eagerly craved.

'Blackwood,' she cried, 'oh, wait for one moment more, only one! If you would but hear me—if you only knew all—you would not think me so base as you think me now. Have not I suffered also? Have you had all the pain? Ah, surely, surely you will not go away for ever without saying one kind word to me, whom once you loved!'

She held out her small hands to him beseechingly, sobbing with painful vehemence. Her beautiful face was wet with sad repentant tears, and Blackwood, looking on, saw, as in some well-remembered dream, the same form, the same hands held out to him as in the old oak parlour at the Manor so many months since.

The sight of her bitter grief roused within him all the better feelings of his manhood; his stubborn will grew weaker, his heart relented. Striding across the room to her side, he accepted the proffered hands.

'You have conquered,' he said hoarsely. 'I leave you my full and free forgiveness—take it, and be happy in your new life. But, for all that, it is indeed farewell between us two. I shall never again enter your presence, or listen to your voice, or look on your beloved face; so bid me good-bye now, and— and may Heaven bless and keep you, my one love!' His accents were broken with emotion.

Katherine, her prayer granted, the dear wish of her heart fulfilled, nevertheless could not speak the last sad word that should part them for ever in this world. She could only stoop, and between her sobs press a timid, humble little caress upon his clasping hand; after which she turned away

despairingly, and he passed out into the raw cold air to meet the fate that awaited him.

When he was gone Lady Warrenne went up to her own room, and dressed herself hurriedly to go out into the leafless woods—anywhere away from the stifling atmosphere of the house—and endeavour to shake off the terrible depression that weighed her down as though determined to crush her to the ground. Perhaps it was the knowledge of Blackwood's departure, perhaps it was the sense of coming evil—who shall say?

But there it lay, the leaden weight, cold and heavy on her heart, pursuing her through the sighing woods and into the clearing beyond like a dark ill-omened thing, that never left her until, having gained a small copse on her right hand, she saw Blackwood Craven walking before her, gun in hand. She had seen him for barely an instant—nay, afterwards it almost seemed as though there was not a second's interval—when the report of a gun rang through the air, followed by a sharp agonised cry that told but too surely of death's victory, and Blackwood, with a dull, crashing, lifeless sound, fell to the soddened earth.

Lady Warrenne sprang forward and knelt down by his side, just as Sir Mark, from an opposite direction, came hurrying up, having also heard both the gun's report and its attendant cry.

Katherine had Blackwood's head on her knees, and was pushing back the hair from his forehead, in a half unconscious, dazed manner, when he reached her.

'Katherine,' he exclaimed, 'what has happened?'—stooping down and tearing open the young man's coat, only to lay his hand upon a heart that but too surely had ceased to beat.

Sir Mark felt his face growing cold, his limbs trembling. It was too awful, too horrible to contemplate—he could not believe it. Only half an hour since Craven had been in such life and spirits—it appeared to Sir Mark now that he had never seen him in such good spirits as that morning—and now—now—— Katherine, too—how did she come there? It was no place for her, poor delicate darling. She must be got home in some way or other. He stepped forward, and tried to raise the lifeless head from her supporting arms. She pushed him from her.

'Do not you see that he is dead,' she said, in an awful whisper—'*dead*? Go away, and do not disturb him. He is

mine now, you know, my own—you cannot grudge him to me any longer’—placing, as she spoke, her small fingers over the dead eyes lovingly.

‘Katherine!’ Sir Mark exclaimed, half fearing that the horror of the scene had stolen away her senses, and half fearing something else that sent the blood rushing wildly to his heart. ‘Do not speak like that, my darling. Give him to me, and tell me how it happened, if you can.’

‘His gun went off and shot him. I saw it all quite distinctly,’ Katherine explained methodically. ‘He gave a cry—oh, such a cry!—and then he fell. Do not change his position, Mark—it is useless; and he is lying just where he would have chosen to lie, could he but know it.’ Then, her tone of horrible calmness suddenly changing to one of the wildest despair, she exclaimed passionately, wringing her hands—‘Oh, Blackwood, speak to me, speak to me! I will not believe that you are dead. Mark, save him, do something for him! Do you *wish* him to die, that you stand there so coldly, without an attempt of any kind to save him? Oh, my love, my love, why cannot I lie there instead of you, so peacefully at rest?’

Her eyes were dry and tearless, but hopeless misery was written on every lineament of her expressive face, and she seemed to take no notice whatever of Sir Mark, who stood beside her in silence, too stricken for consolation or speech of any kind, but waking slowly to the consciousness that his wife—whom for all these past months he had been cherishing in the fond hope that one day she would love him as he loved her—had long years ago given all the priceless treasure of her heart to another man.

And Blackwood—now, for the first time, he understood his evident reluctance to visit Warrenne Hall, a reluctance that at the moment had seemed to Sir Mark so singular. Poor Craven!—though it appeared to Warrenne just then, standing there full of life and health above the dead man, that, if Blackwood had been carrying as sore a heart in his bosom as he himself was carrying now, his lot was by far the happier of the two. At this point in his meditations the keeper appeared at some little distance amongst the trees, and Sir Mark went hurriedly to meet him.

‘Mr. Craven has shot himself,’ he explained briefly; ‘run to the house or one of the nearest cottages, and bring something to carry him home upon.’

After what seemed to the silent watchers an interminable delay the man returned, bringing with him some farming-men and a rude impromptu litter, on which, with gentle, kindly hands, they laid poor Craven, and bore him in solemn awe-struck speechlessness to the Hall.

Here they were met by Archibald Blount, shocked out of all his indolent selfishness as he gazed with uneasy conscience at his nephew's corpse, and remembered with deep remorse, for the first time, how fatal all that past scene in the Manor library had been to the happiness of the poor boy now lying dead before his eyes.

They carried Blackwood upstairs, and laid him upon his bed, after which doctors were sent for, as a matter of duty, though in this case there was not the faintest ray of hope to sustain the mourners with fond delusive dreams until the final fiat should be uttered.

When all was done that tenderness and love could do Lady Warrenne went downstairs, pallid and heart-broken, to where Sir Mark was sitting in his private room, his face buried in his hands.

'I have come to tell you all about it,' she said, going over to him and laying her hand lightly on his shoulder.

He rose, placed a chair for her, with a weariness in his manner that at any other time most surely must have touched her, and then motioned to her to proceed. She told him her whole story from beginning to end, glossing over nothing, making nothing worse, and waited when her sad history was finished to hear what he would say, to receive all the hard words and harder reproaches which she felt she deserved at his hands—to reap the fruit of her father's sowing.

Warrenne got up and came over to her in the gathering twilight, pausing beside her chair.

'My poor darling,' he said gently—'my poor little girl!' And that was all.

Simple words they were in themselves, but surely heaven-born in their tender pity. Those few loving terms—coming from the quarter whence she had least right to expect them—did more for her certainly than all the harsh measures that could have been used. She bowed her fair sorrowing head upon her hands, and burst into bitter, albeit soothing tears.

'Do not cry, my dear,' said Sir Mark—'perhaps it is better as it is. Poor Blackwood—his was a hard life, and a harder fate; but yet, Katherine, there is another who, to know that

he was loved by you as he was loved, would gladly change places with Blackwood this moment. Oh, darling, I think of the two my portion is the harder to bear! But tell me now what you would wish me to do for you, and I will do it.'

'I only want to go away—to be anywhere by myself—to be alone,' Katherine sobbed faintly, without raising her head.

'So you shall,' Warrenne answered bravely, although a sharp spasm of agony shot across and disfigured his handsome Saxon face for an instant. 'You shall go away by yourself, but not "anywhere." I have another estate in Warwickshire, a pretty secluded place enough, that shall be all your own exclusively, if you will have it.'

'And you?' his wife asked, looking up at him anxiously for the first time.

'Oh, as for me,' Sir Mark replied, endeavouring to speak cheerfully, but turning away his face that she might not see what havoc the last few hours had wrought upon it, 'I shall go abroad and return once more to my old wandering habits! Do not trouble yourself about my welfare—I shall do very well, I dare say. But in your new home, Katherine, you must learn to be happier than you have ever been in this, my poor love; yet I *meant* to make your life a pleasant one, no matter how dismally I failed. You will learn to forget all these late griefs and sorrows in time, when you have no one near to remind you of them, not even me, as I promise faithfully you shall not see me again until you wish for me. A nonsensical speech,' he added, with a little wistful smile, 'that only proves to myself how long my banishment will be!'

To this she made no answer—indeed he scarcely seemed to expect one—and a dead silence that lasted for several minutes fell upon them both. Lady Warrenne, sitting there in the huge crimson chair, her tiny figure half hidden in the velvet cushions, might have been mistaken for a marble statue robed, so motionless she sat; while over her, tall and fair, stood Sir Mark, like some ancient knight guarding a sleeping fairy. Presently he broke the spell.

'Good-bye, Katherine,' he said.

'*Good-bye*,' rising from amongst the cushions and looking half frightened, 'good-bye—so soon!'

'Yes; it is better so.' He had conceived the idea, poor fellow, that he was more or less of a nuisance to his own wife, and, though very loath to part with what he loved so well, still he could not endure the thought that his presence was

distasteful to her. 'I will arrange everything for you, Katherine, so do not put yourself to any trouble; but, if you have any particular wish, you had better tell it to me now, as I have business that will take me to town early to-morrow morning. You can start for Tyne Royal the day after that, or the next day, unless'—dropping his voice—'you would prefer remaining here until after the funeral.' Katherine shivered. 'I think that is all I have to say,' he went on, a faint tremor pervading his voice in spite of all his manliness. 'So now bid me good-bye, my darling, and—and—think of me sometimes, Katherine!'

Lady Warrenne strove hard to speak, but the words appeared to freeze upon her lips; speech and thought seemed alike to have deserted her; she could only remember clearly that Blackwood was gone, that Mark was going, and that all the world beyond was a blank to her for evermore; while the same dark sense of lingering evil that had haunted her all the morning fell upon her heart once more, threatening to stifle her with its vague dull pain. She felt her senses leaving her, when Sir Mark's voice brought her back again to a slight remembrance of the present.

'Katherine, Katherine,' he cried, bitter pain and disappointment mingled in his tones, 'you are silent—you do not even wish me God-speed! Oh, darling, have you forgotten that I too love you with all my heart and soul? I am going away now—perhaps I shall never see you again—have you no word to say to me? Surely, before I leave, you will kiss me once of your own free-will!'

Katherine went up to him as in a dream, and, putting her arms round his neck, raised her face to his.

'Good-bye, my love, good-bye!' he whispered hoarsely, pressing his lips to hers, and holding her close to as loyal and true a heart as ever man had; but an instant later her head drooped upon his shoulder, while her form grew heavy in his arms, and he carried her up to her own room insensible.

CHAPTER VI.

Tyne Royal, Oct. 10, 18—.

‘DEAREST HARRY,—Are you very angry with me because I never answered your long, kind letters? Well, I could not—that is my only excuse. And you will, I know, forgive me. I am very lonely here, and—and a little frightened. Will you come to me? Tell Charlie I will not keep you long—only a very little time—if he will just spare you to me for a while. Give him and the children my love, and ever believe me your own

‘ KATHERINE.

‘P.S.—Oh, Harry, do come! I want you.’

‘Charlie,’ cried Mrs. Charteris, springing to her feet, ‘this letter is from our Katherine.’

‘Nonsense!’ exclaimed Charlie, feeling scarcely less excited, and entirely forgetting in his enthusiasm the ‘sweet thing’ in cockchafers he had received by the morning’s post. ‘You don’t say so.’

‘Ah, yes, indeed, thank goodness, poor dear child! Listen to what she says;’ and Mrs. Charteris read the letter through once more, for her husband’s benefit.

‘You must go to her at once, Harry,’ Mr. Charteris decided, when it was finished; ‘she is evidently dying of the “blues.” Warrenne had no right to send her to such an isolated spot as I conclude this Tyne Royal must be, no matter how much she may have wished it. Could you not manage to bring her back here with you, Harry? Poor little soul, without a friend to speak to, no wonder she feels lonely!’

‘You fancy it is loneliness,’ said Harriet slowly; ‘I do not. Charlie, did you never think?’

An eloquent silence ensued.

‘No, I never did,’ replied Charlie quite slowly, a new light breaking in upon his hitherto darkened mind, and totally forgetful of all those abstruse calculations he went through daily in the ‘sanctum.’

‘Well, I did,’ went on his wife triumphantly; ‘and now I am sure of it.’

'Bless me,' ejaculated Mr. Charteris—'that never occurred to me! I hope you are right—you generally are, indeed. Why, it would be the very best thing that could happen—eh, don't you think so? Harry, my dear, do not lose a moment; I firmly believe that everything will come all right in the end now.'

'I will go and pack up a few things this moment, and give some directions to Lawson—though how you and the children are to get on during my absence is more than I can imagine. You really must promise me, Charlie, to give up your insects and nonsense while I am away, and keep the boys out of mischief, as I cannot depend upon a single servant in the place, and if Tinsley once gets into your laboratory, he will undoubtedly blow himself up.'

'He certainly has a wonderful genius for experimentalising,' returned Tinsley's father, with a smile that expressed the highest pride in his first-born's predilections. 'But you may be happy in your mind; I promise he shall not soil so much as the tips of his fingers—in *my* apartments, at all events.'

'That's a dear boy,' said his wife pleasantly, running out of the room to make preparations for her journey.

She was a woman who always entered with her whole heart into any matter, however small, she had in hand, never letting 'the grass grow under her feet;' and so the next evening, rather late, saw her alighting at the hall-door of Katherine's new residence, as fresh and charming as though railway journeys and the fatigues accompanying them were of no consequence whatever.

Tyne Royal, as she entered it, seemed almost as fine a house as Warrenne Hall, and by no means gloomy, as both she and Charlie had agreed to consider it. It was not so large, perhaps, as the latter residence, but was quite as beautifully kept up. Still she had little time to institute comparisons as she followed the ancient butler up the broad carved staircase to the upper corridor, where she was met by an under housemaid and a large, red-faced, muscular, and altogether remarkable-looking person, with an eye that would have cowed a body-guard.

This austere individual waited in solemn silence and a rather menacing attitude for Mrs. Charteris's first remark.

'How is Lady Warrenne?' Harriet asked in a low, hushed tone, as though afraid of waking somebody.

'Beautiful, ma'am, beautiful—you needn't be nervous,'

replied the Lady of the Bedchamber with an obvious sniff, and at the very tip-top of her most energetic voice, as though determined to ignore Mrs. Charteris's attempt at quietness. 'Follow me, mum'—leading the way into an adjoining apartment, where, amidst a wilderness of pillows, lay Katherine Warrenne, with a little fragile morsel of humanity in her arms.

'My darling!' cried the warm-hearted Harriet Charteris with a sob of intense emotion, running over and kneeling down by her side, while Katherine could only throw her soft white arm round her friend's neck, and weep silent joyful tears.

Presently Mrs. Charteris became aware that something was due to the other small inmate of the chamber; so she pushed back the pink flannel to gaze at the wee face it contained, and was immediately lost in admiration of the tiny wrinkled features, that looked like nothing in all the world so much as a quaint indiarubber painted face.

'When was it?' she asked.

'The very day I wrote to you,' Katherine answered, a proud happy smile lighting up her small face; 'so my darling is just three days old'—passing fond loving fingers over the unconscious baby forehead.

'A boy?' Harriet asked again, peering down mysteriously into the precious, cosy bundle.

'Yes, a boy!' Lady Warrenne responded gratefully, though why she should have been so thankful that the child could come under the denomination of a 'son and heir' Harriet could not conceive, unless indeed she fancied that somebody else might be so.

'You naughty child, not to send for me before,' Mrs. Charteris said lovingly. 'I am really angry with you, and horribly jealous of that formidable dragon I met just outside your door, who seemed anxious to carry me off at once to the lock-up, and who I am sure would have killed you, had not Providence sent me to the rescue. Well, now I am here I have decided that I shall stay with you for a month, until you are perfectly strong and able to defy her; so I constitute myself your chief nurse in ordinary, with all due respect to your "old soldier."'

'Will you really stay with me for so long?' Katherine exclaimed delightedly. 'Oh, how good of you! But Charlie—what will he say, and the children?'

'They must do without me for a while, though really, my

dear, between those wretched servants and Charlie's laboratory, I have small hope of seeing them alive again—in fact, my life is a burden to me ;' and Harriet smiled as brightly as though laboratories and burdens were the two pleasantest things in all the world. 'Whatever you do, Katherine, never let that darling baby—bless him!—so much as look at anything that explodes, or he will get a taste for it, and worry you into your grave.'

Katherine laughed—a low, glad little laugh, very good to hear. 'It is so sweet to have you near me,' she said, caressing Harry's soft round pretty cheek with her fragile fingers.

'Unless you want to worrit her ladyship into a raging fever, mum, you will stop talkin',' broke in a threatening voice at the door.

Both ladies started, Harriet rather consciously.

'I don't fancy it is doing me any harm, nurse,' Katherine declared very meekly ; 'indeed, I feel considerably stronger.'

'Oh, I dessay,' said the veteran, with a withering glance at Mrs. Charteris—'with your eyes quite wild, and your cheeks all flushed, pore dear ! Well, Heavin knows where 'twill end ; but I wouldn't care for the extinction of havin' slain a human creetur ;' with which parting shot at the intruder she stalked from the room.

Mrs. Charteris talked no more that night.

CHAPTER VII.

NEARLY the whole of the stipulated month passed away pleasantly and swiftly enough, enlivened by daily skirmishes with Mrs. Ruskin—the belligerent—in which Harriet always came off victorious, to the former's intense disgust, until at length she was finally defeated, and Lady Warrenne was looking quite strong and handsome again, while the baby had grown positively beautiful—in fact, the most beautiful baby in all the world—and knew its mamma perfectly. At least, so its mamma said, and of course nobody—not even Mrs. Ruskin, that most formidable personage—was rude enough to contradict her.

That Lady Warrenne was happy in her new-found treasure there could be little doubt. With the little one in her arms

she was a picture of mingled pride and intense gratification ; yet there were times nevertheless when her eyes resumed their old, restless, unsatisfied expression, and when she would sit before the blazing fire dreaming for an hour together of far-off scenes, to the total forgetfulness of all surrounding objects.

These signs and tokens of a 'mind diseased' were all carefully noted and marked down in her busy brain by Mrs. Charteris, and, oddly enough, were secretly exulted over by that unfeeling young woman in the privacy of her own apartment, besides being frequently the subject of numerous letters despatched to Charteris Park.

So things went on until Harry's leave had almost expired, and she and Lady Warrenne were sitting one morning in the nursery, the baby slumbering peacefully in its little cot close by. Katherine had fallen into one of her absent moods, and sat gazing with wistful eyes into the leaping fire, when she was startled by the touch of Harry's hand, laid gently upon her knee.

'Katherine,' said Mrs. Charteris, 'why do not you say at once what it is you want, my dear ?'

'Want !' Lady Warrenne repeated, a conscious flush overspreading her fair face. 'Why, you are dreaming, Harriet ! What can I possibly have to wish for ? I want nothing ;' and she glanced with nervous fondness towards the cradle.

'Yes, you do,' returned Harry bravely—'you want Mark—you want the best fellow that ever breathed—you want the father of your boy.'

'Oh, no, no !' cried her poor little ladyship excitedly, bursting into tears, and throwing her arms around Harriet's neck.

'But, oh, yes, yes !' that determined diplomatist went on valiantly, resolved at all hazards to gain her point now that she had at last found opportunity for broaching the forbidden topic. 'Why, Katherine, consider, my dear—what are you thinking of ? The little one is a month old to-day, and his own father has never even been told of his existence. Now is that right—is it kind ? Putting every other consideration aside, how can you be so selfish as to keep that beautiful boy all to yourself, when you know Mark would be so proud of him, his dear little son ?'

'I do not know anything of the kind,' Katherine answered, drying her eyes, and making a laudable effort to appear dignified. 'You do not understand, Harry. He has never written

so much as a line to me since he left, so many months ago—there!—and—and I dare say he has forgotten all about such a disagreeable, perverse creature as I am, long, long before this.'

'How can you talk such abominable nonsense,' Mrs. Charteris broke in almost angrily, 'when you know very well that he loves you this moment just as devotedly—I had nearly said foolishly—as ever he did? You could hardly expect him to write love-letters to a woman who let him see—as you did—how little she cared for him. Come, be sensible, Katherine, and say at once that you are positively anxious to meet him again and make it all up, as I am sure you must be dying to do, unless you are totally unworthy of the best husband that ever breathed—my own Charlie alone excepted. I wonder you are not longing to show him that perfect child.'

'I do not believe he would care to see him one bit,' Lady Warrenne declared obstinately, going over to the baby's cradle and kneeling down beside it. 'In spite of all you say, Harriet, you know in your heart he ought to have written. Not that I care—do not think it—only—only'—apostrophising the sleeping cherub—'you and I can never care to see those that do not care to see us—can we, my angel?'

But Harriet did care, no matter how indifferent Katherine might profess to be; so, after a few minutes had passed in thoughtful silence, she made some plausible excuse, and quitting the room, ran quickly down the stairs, where—in the most surreptitious and underhand manner imaginable—she found out Sir Mark Warrenne's address from the housekeeper, and forthwith indited him a somewhat lengthy epistle, in which she laid before him the exact state of affairs, and wound up by demanding his presence at Tyne Royal without loss of time.

This letter she sealed and deposited in the post-bag, after which she went upstairs again to Katherine's room, and, without a single sign of conscious guilt upon her countenance, entered into conversation with that unsuspecting woman.

The whole of the next day she watched and waited for some recognition of her intelligence, until about four o'clock, when she received an ominous-looking red-coloured envelope, which contained a telegraphic despatch from Sir Mark, to the effect that he would reach Tyne Royal about five or six o'clock on the following evening.

This telegram Mrs. Charteris dropped into her pocket, and

said nothing about it until the next morning at breakfast, when—

‘Katherine,’ said she slowly, ‘something tells me that Mark will be here to-day.’

‘Oh, Harriet!’ poor Lady Warrenne exclaimed, setting down her tea-cup, and turning so pale that Mrs. Charteris was fairly frightened.

‘Now, Katherine, do not be silly,’ she said hurriedly, rising and pouring some eau-de-Cologne upon a handkerchief, which she applied to Katherine’s forehead—‘there is nothing so very appalling in what I have said, I am sure, to make you look so white and scared. He is only your husband after all, you know, though really one would imagine from your manner that he was a modern Bluebeard at the very least—or a wolf in sheep’s clothing—or anything else equally unpleasant. Look here—if you faint, my dear, you will be sorry for it, as I protest I will elope with your son and heir before you have time to recover, and carry him off to Nova Scotia.’

‘You wrote to him?’ Lady Warrenne asked, trembling in every limb, and taking no heed of Harriet’s good-natured chatter.

‘Yes, I wrote to him,’ that lady admitted heroically, going down on her knees beside Katherine’s chair, and beginning to feel slightly repentant, not to say conscience-stricken—though triumphant, nevertheless—as she watched the other’s face. ‘As you would not, you know, I did—and a very good thing too. Now, Katherine, you will cheer up, will you not, and try to look your prettiest and sweetest, and put on the most enchanting dress in your wardrobe, so that when this inhuman Bluebeard does arrive he may be turned from his murderous designs by the extreme beauty of his wife and child?’

With suchlike idle talk did Mrs. Charteris strive to beguile away all the interminable hours of that most interminable day, giving Katherine small time to think of anything beyond the passing moment, by hovering over her with little gay words and nonsensical speeches, that somehow did succeed in dissipating the minutes with wonderful rapidity—minutes that would have been insupportable if endured in solitude or silence.

As the evening drew on and the daylight faded lamps were brought to the sitting-room where Lady Warrenne sat, dressed with more than her ordinary care, and looking calmly lovely, though she could have counted each beat of her throbbing

heart. Opposite to her sat Harriet, endeavouring, with all her might, to keep up the desultory conversation that, in spite of all her exertions, bade fair to come to an untimely end.

Half-past five, chimed out the diminutive clock on the chimney-piece, with a vivacity that considerably startled both the listeners, but scarcely had the last silvery stroke died away when Mrs. Charteris's heart rose precipitately to her mouth, as distinctly on the distant gravel she discerned the sound of carriage wheels. She rose at once, but with the most commendable self-possession.

'I will be back in one moment, Katherine,' she said carelessly, with her usual pleasant smile, and went out of the room calmly enough, closing the door behind her.

But, having once performed this task, she ran swiftly and breathlessly down the broad staircase, and through the long silent hall to the door, which she opened herself for Sir Mark Warrenne.

'Katherine?' was all the young man could say, nervously catching both her hands.

'It is all right—I have told her—she is expecting you,' Mrs. Charteris gasped disconnectedly, almost sobbing with excitement and delight. 'She is in the blue room—go to her.'

'How shall I ever thank you?' Warrenne answered, kissing her warmly in the intense gratitude of his heart—an unexpected proceeding that first astonished and then amused Mrs. Charteris beyond measure; but, before she had time to offer any comment, the Baronet had run upstairs, without encountering any one, and opened the door of the apartment where his wife was waiting to receive him.

Katherine had risen, and when he entered was holding on firmly to the back of a chair, looking beautiful, but with a face as white as death. She gave a little low subdued cry when she saw him, and held out her arms. Sir Mark caught her.

'My darling—my darling!' he murmured brokenly.

CHAPTER VIII.

‘AND when did you first discover that I was a little bit necessary to your happiness?’ Sir Mark asked his wife fondly half an hour later—a certain thirty minutes that to them, in their new-found happiness, had appeared as something less than five.

‘I think, from the very first moment that I lost you,’ she answered, with a sweet, soft laugh, glancing up at him shyly, with well-contented glistening eyes. ‘But this I know—that, from the time our baby came till now, I have wanted you more than words can tell, if only to let you see what a perfect treasure he is.’

‘And yet you would not write and tell me to come, you proud little girl!’ Sir Mark said, gazing down with ineffable tenderness upon the almost childish figure at his side. ‘I must administer a lecture to you some of these days, to prevent your getting “a fall.” But you will take me now to see this “perfect treasure,” will you not?’

‘Come,’ she said, slipping her small fingers into his, with a delightful sense of security, and leading the way through one or two intermediate chambers to the nursery, where baby lay in high state, slumbering peacefully all alone, Mrs. Ruskin having most opportunely gone down to the housekeeper’s pantry a moment before to procure some necessaries for her own comfort. Lady Warrenne stooped, and, raising the baby from his tiny rose-lined cot, placed him in his father’s arms.

‘Is he not beautiful?’ she whispered, intense pride and affection quivering in her voice.

‘He is!’ said Sir Mark, as in duty bound, imprinting a kiss upon the boy’s fair cheek.

After this the mother took him back again, and replaced him in his cosy bed, without disturbing his sleep.

‘I was so glad it was a boy,’ Lady Warrenne said, turning again towards her husband, and speaking in the same hushed manner—‘so glad—because—I fancied you would prefer it.’

‘Yes; I am glad it is a son. He is not christened yet, I suppose?’

‘No, he is very young, and I had not decided on a name;

but now, if you would like it, Mark, I think we might call him "Felix," because he has brought happiness to us at last.'

It was possibly nothing but a very ridiculous girlish idea—an idea expressed with much confusion and hesitation—but it seemed very sweet to Sir Mark just then.

'He has, my darling,' he answered, drawing her nearer to him—'happiness that, please Heaven, shall never again be disturbed. But I think, Katherine, there is one other name we might put before even that. Shall we '—here he hesitated for a moment or two, and then proceeded hurriedly—'call him "Blackwood Felix"?''

There was a moment's pause, and then Lady Warrenne, bursting into tears, threw her arms round her husband's neck.

'Oh, Mark, Mark,' she sobbed, 'you were always too good for me, my dear!'

After this little repentant admission there ensued a somewhat lengthened silence, long enough, at all events, to allow Katherine Warrenne's heart to pass for ever into her husband's keeping.

'Now you must go away, and get yourself ready for dinner,' she said presently, when she had dried her tears and called back once more the willing radiant smiles. 'Harriet ordered it early on purpose for you, so you have little time.'

'Very well, I shall not be a moment,' Sir Mark answered, opening a door that led into the gallery. 'But will you and Harriet be civil to me in this dress?'—glancing at the morning clothes he wore.

'Yes, we will of course—I promise,' Katherine said, adding, with a bewitching little smile and blush, 'you look very nice—to me. Now go up to my room, the first you will come to, and make haste.'

'But do not on any account meddle with the rouge or the pearl-powder,' Mrs. Charteris put in gaily. She was running up the stairs at the moment, and had overheard the last remark.

'Oh, no fear—I leave all that to you two!' Warrenne answered promptly, with a short laugh, as he ran up the steps with almost boyish elasticity, such a wealth of joy surging up within his heart as he had never dared to hope for in this life.

'Harriet,' cried Lady Warrenne, when she had drawn her friend into the blue sitting-room and closed the door, 'what shall I say to you? How can I thank you, when I feel that

but for your goodness we might have gone on to our lives' end without a reconciliation? Dearest, my only regret is that it will be impossible for me to love you better than I do at present.'

'I do not want thanks,' Mrs. Charteris broke in merrily, feeling thoroughly in her element—'your face is enough for me. Any artist would sketch you this moment joyfully as a model for Contentment. Well'—maliciously—'do you acknowledge now that you wanted him?'

'Yes. I will even acknowledge that I am far happier than I deserve to be,' Katherine answered, well satisfied to confess herself defeated. 'And he is looking very well too, Harry, is he not?'

'Just a little thin, perhaps,' Mrs. Charteris suggested.

'Well, yes, now that I think of it, he is looking a degree thinner than he used to be—but very handsome it seems to me.'

Katherine finished so naïvely that Harriet burst into a merry ringing laugh, in which, after a few ineffectual struggles to maintain her composure, Lady Warrenne joined heartily.

Their mirth had by no means subsided when Sir Mark again entered, appearing considerably benefited by his hasty toilet.

'What are you both laughing about?' he asked, unable himself to repress a smile at their evident enjoyment.

'About you,' replied Mrs. Charteris mischievously. 'Your wife has just discovered for the first time how extremely handsome you are;' whereupon Katherine blushed crimson, and would have attempted some denial, had not a servant at this juncture announced the important fact that dinner was served.

LYDIA.

‘ Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day ? ’—SHAKESPEARE.

LADY LYDIA FARRINGDON was just nineteen. She was one of the smallest creatures in the world, as well as one of the warmest-hearted. Moreover, she was beautiful. She had the largest, darkest eyes and the fairest hair to be found anywhere—which combination of colours, being a rarity at the time, made her the fashion. To add to the peculiarity of her style, it was her pleasure, except on certain occasions, to dress always in black velvet. This gave her a pretty, quaint appearance that greatly charmed the eye—at least the eyes of all her lovers, whose name was Legion. For how, with her youth, beauty, sweetness, and forty thousand pounds, could she be anything but admired ?

Nevertheless she had her faults. She had a temper, and was by no means incapable of losing it. But then she could always put her hand on it again at a moment’s notice, which was one good sign ; and her maid adored her, which may be deemed another.

This maid was a treasure, and exactly suited to her place, being nearly as pretty as her mistress, in her own way, and quite as small, with large black eyes, bright and beady, and long black hair coiled smoothly round her head. She wore the gayest clothing compatible with her station in life, and her name was Clochette.

‘ Clochette,’ said Lady Lydia, ‘ put out my very prettiest dress at half-past one. I expect some people to lunch.’ She said ‘ people,’ but had she said ‘ a person ’ it would perhaps have been more correct.

‘ Yes, *miladi*,’ said Clochette ; and at half-past one precisely the prettiest dress in her lady’s wardrobe lay on the bed.

It consisted as usual of black velvet, with just a suspicion of old point-lace at the throat and wrists. When dressed, her

ladyship looked slightly old-fashioned, and altogether charming. This—having examined herself critically in the glass—she was quite aware of, and so turned to her maid for sympathy.

‘Ah, *miladi*, but you are perfect!’ said that sprightly damsel, with a genuine air.

‘Yes? And my hair? It is——’ hesitated Lady Lydia.

‘Everything of the most lovely,’ said the fond Clochette; whereupon Lady Lydia descended.

In the hall she encountered the footman, coming towards her with his lips parted.

‘I know,’ she said, and, opening the drawing-room door, found she did not know, as inside awaited her, not one gentleman, as she expected, but two. She blushed a little; and Jeames, seeing the blush, guessed the whole thing, and went away revenged.

The unexpected visitor was a tall, rather grave-looking man of between twenty-nine and thirty, and of an air perhaps more distinguished than handsome. Lady Lydia Farrington held out her hand when she saw him, and smiled sweetly.

‘Good-morning,’ she said. There was perhaps the faintest indication of vexation in her eyes, but this was not perceptible in her smile, which was beautiful. For all that, Lord Fenton saw and marked it.

‘How d’ye do?’ she said to her other friend; after which they all sat down, and told each other it was ‘a charming day.’

‘I fancied you were out of town, she observed to Lord Fenton presently, when Merton, who was talkative, had given himself time to breathe.

‘Well, so I have been,’ returned Fenton. ‘I have only just returned—not been up an hour—and came here directly, as you may perceive.’ This pleased her. ‘How is Lady Langlands?’

‘Pretty well, thanks. Nothing does aunt Katherine up so much as a ball, so I fear you won’t see her to-day. By-the-by, why didn’t you run up last night in time for the Yorkes? It was very good—the best of the season, I think. Cissy was there, looking quite radiant. You should have seen her.’

‘I see quite enough of her, said Fenton, ungraciously—it was evident he did not care for ‘Cissy.’ ‘I would scarcely leave the country to come up to see her’—emphatically.

Here Sir Merton thought it high time to intervene.

'I am so glad to see you looking as you do,' he murmured, tenderly, 'after last night's fatigue. There is no necessity to ask you how you are. You look fit for anything at this present moment.'

'You go out too much,' opposed Lord Fenton, decisively, staring straight through Merton at the opposite wall.

'I wouldn't if there were anything else to do,' retorted Lydia, smothering a yawn most unsuccessfully.

'Surely there must be other ways of occupying one's time besides going incessantly to balls,' said Fenton, severely.

'Of course there are,' said her ladyship, with a little provoking, flippant air, glancing at him from under her long lashes—'such as studying, for instance, and writing reviews and such like; but, as I am unable to study, and cannot compose, such amusements are not for me.'

Lord Fenton looked displeased. Merton laughed.

'What are you going to do this afternoon?' he asked.

'To ride,' answered Lydia, 'with the Cresswells and some others. You know Florence, do you not? Is she not charming? I do believe she is the only woman I know who doesn't bore me to extinction.'

'I like her extremely,' said, with enthusiasm, Sir Merton, who made it a point always to agree with every one, and who hated the girl in question.

Lydia knew that Miss Cresswell was Lord Fenton's *bête noire*, and that, if he had an objection to her—Lady Lydia—being intimate with any one, it was with Miss Cresswell; consequently she said, with her most innocent expression—

'Do you like her, Lord Fenton?'

'I know very little of her,' answered he.

'But, as far as you know her, do you like her?' persisted Lydia, stroking down the ears of the little poodle that lay on her lap.

'I think she is very pretty,' temporised his lordship.

'That is no answer,' declared she, petulantly, now determined to conquer. 'We can all see for ourselves that she is pretty. I want to know what you think of her herself.'

'Oh!' said Fenton. He was angry by this time, and so spoke more warmly than he otherwise might have done. 'Well, then, as you seem bent on learning my opinion of Miss Cresswell, I must tell you that I consider her the fastest, cleverest, slangiest, most ill-natured girl I ever met in my life.'

‘How dreadfully uncharitable!’ cried Lady Lydia, with any amount of well-bred censure discernible in her tones.

‘By Jove!’ exclaimed Sir Merton, becoming suddenly cognisant of the fact that there was a storm brewing somewhere. ‘Do you think that? Well, for my part, if there is one thing I like better than another it is——’

‘Luncheon,’ proclaimed his serene grandeur the butler at this moment—which was perhaps the most fitting thing he ever said, as, if there was one thing in the world Sir Merton more preferred above Lady Lydia Farrington, that thing was his luncheon.

So they all adjourned to the dining-room, where they found a sumptuous repast laid out. Sir Merton did justice to it; Lord Fenton did not. When he had eaten all he could, the former rose to go.

‘I suppose I shall meet you at the club in the course of an hour or so?’ he said to Fenton, amiably. The luncheon had worked wonders. ‘Good-bye, Lady Lydia; I hope I shall see you this evening at the Opera.’

‘I hope so,’ returned her ladyship, smilingly. ‘Good-bye until then.’

‘Lydia,’ began Lord Fenton, when they were alone—he was a very old friend, and generally called her by her Christian name in private—‘I wish you would not associate so much with those Cresswells; they are bad form, no matter how highly connected they may be. Florence Cresswell should not be an intimate acquaintance of yours.’

‘Why not?’ demanded Lydia, with an unmistakable ring of defiance in her tone.

‘Because, as I have often told you before, she is fast, and unfeminine in her tastes. It is horrible to see a woman so entirely given up to pleasure and the world.’ Fenton had now taken a high moral tone, and was getting on remarkably well.

‘She is not worse than I am,’ said Lydia, ‘or any one else I know; we are all more or less devoted to Vanity Fair, I believe. Besides, as you have so often told me, or hinted to me, that I am the most frivolous person of your acquaintance, it is only natural to suppose that a woman “given up to pleasure and the world” would be the most suitable companion I could choose.’

‘I do not remember ever calling you frivolous,’ protested his lordship, warmly; ‘it is impossible I should have done so, as I certainly do not think it. I only say that, in accepting

Florence Cresswell as a friend, you are doing a foolish as well as a wrong thing.'

'You are prejudiced,' said Lydia. 'What have you to say against her?'

'Many things; but one will be quite sufficient. I mean her intimacy with such a man as Croydon, of the Carabineers.'

Lydia flushed hotly.

'Why should she not be intimate with him?' she demanded. 'I know him myself. I intend riding with him this very afternoon in the Park.'

After this announcement there was a dead pause. Lady Lydia Farringdon looked at the window, and Lord Charles Fenton looked at Lady Lydia.

'Lydia,' said he, sternly, 'you shall not go riding with that man'—which was perhaps the worst thing he could have said under the circumstances, as it made Lady Lydia decide then and there that with 'that man' she both should and would go riding.

'Shall I not?' said she. 'Time will show. And, if you happen to be in the Park about an hour or so from now, you will probably be able to see for yourself.'

'I will speak to your father!' exclaimed Fenton, angrily.

'Do,' answered Lydia—'I would if I were you. He started for Edinburgh this morning to see aunt Mary; but I dare say, if you make haste, you may catch him, and can then telegraph his commands to me. I have no doubt the message will reach me about this time to-morrow.'

'And you choose the day he is away to make an appointment with this man,' said Fenton, hastily, 'knowing well that if he were here he would forbid your even acknowledging him as a common acquaintance! I am astonished, Lydia, to find you capable of doing such a thing. I would not have believed it of you. It is downright deceptive!'

'How dare you speak so to me?' broke out Lydia, indignantly. 'You are extremely rude; and I am not deceptive. You know as well as I do that if papa were here this moment I should go riding just the same. You understand perfectly that he never interferes with any of my arrangements. The idea of your coming here to scold and—and abuse me in my own rooms! I never heard of such a thing in my life!'

Her usually soft brown eyes were flashing scorn as she

spoke, and Fenton began to feel considerably snubbed. Standing even upon tip-toe this small creature could have passed beneath his arm ; but for all that she ruled him as despotically as any Eastern ever ruled a slave.

‘I beg your pardon,’ began Fenton, humbly, entreatingly. ‘But, oh, Lydia, if you have the slightest regard for me, give up this riding-party just to please me.’

‘Neither to please you nor any one else will I give it up,’ decided Lydia, with uncompromising emphasis—‘least of all to oblige you. Why should I, when you are never anything but systematically uncivil to me, and when I don’t even like you—when, in fact, I most particularly dislike you ? There !’

She was extremely angry, and had turned her back on him, and consequently could not see his face. Perhaps, had she done so, she might have relented, and said something kind ; as it was, she said nothing. When next Fenton spoke, his tone was completely changed.

‘Good-bye,’ he said, and held out his hand ; but Lady Lydia would not see it.

‘Say good-bye to me, Lydia,’ he requested sadly ; ‘I am going abroad at the end of the week, and it will be very long before I see you again.’

‘I am glad to hear it,’ said Lydia—‘I hope so with all my heart. I trust it will be a very, very long time before I have the misfortune to see you again.’

After that there was nothing more to be said, so Lord Fenton walked out of the room.

When he was gone, Lydia, with flushed cheeks and indignant eyes, ran up to her own pretty little boudoir, and threw herself upon a lounge.

‘Clochette, my head is aching !’ she cried ; whereupon her maid, who was busy in some distant corner, came swiftly towards her, full of deep concern.

‘What is it, then ? What will have come to you, *miladi* ?’ she asked anxiously, adopting the tone she would have used to soothe a sick child. ‘Will you try the perfumes ? They are for the ache of the head the very best thing.’ She approached the lounge as she spoke, and held out eau-de-Cologne. ‘Shall I bathe ?’ she inquired.

‘No ; I will do it myself,’ said Lydia. ‘But shut the door very gently behind you, Clochette, and be sure you are ready to come to me the moment I ring.’

‘Ah, it is all that handsome monsieur, Milor Mairtone,’

decided Clochette, satisfactorily, and closed the door very quietly behind her.

When she was once more alone, Lydia called to her aid Johann Maria Farina, but without the desired result. After ten minutes' incessant bathing she found her head ached as persistently as ever. Her brain seemed in a whirl. She pushed the bottle petulantly away from her and began to think. She was still very angry, but the keen edge of her resentment had vanished, and something like a sense of uneasiness disturbed her. She endeavoured bravely to beat off the advancing foe, and still to nourish and keep warm her just indignation, but vainly. Try as she would, she could not feel glad that this man who had 'abused and scolded her in her own rooms' was going away to distant lands.

At the end of the week, he had said, he was going, That might probably mean Saturday, and at present it was Tuesday; surely, in the interval, he would come once again to see her. But, if not—— Well, if not, so much the better then, and she would at least be free from all interference on his part for months, perhaps years, to come.

Oddly enough, this idea failed to produce all the satisfaction expected from it. On the contrary, indeed, it brought only hot rebellious tears to Lydia's eyes and a choking sensation to her throat. How cross he had been, and all about nothing too! While she—what was it she had said? She tried to call to mind, but could remember nothing distinctly beyond the fact that she had told him how she particularly disliked him, and that immediately afterwards he had signified his intention of leaving England without further delay. Ah, surely it was not she herself who by her cruel words was driving him away from home! She did her best to disbelieve this miserable thought, but something within her whispered sternly that it was the truth—the result of which whispering was that she laid her golden head down amongst the soft warm cushions and cried bitterly for five long minutes.

After this, feeling slightly better, she sat up again and began to meditate on what would be the best thing to do under the circumstances. She would write to Charlie—dear old Charlie—and tell him she had never meant a word of it, and beg him to come and see her if only once again before he left. She half rose to carry this idea into execution, when a sudden consciousness of what all this might mean made her hesitate and finally sink down a second time upon her seat.

Just then the little clock upon the mantelpiece chimed three hours, and at half-past 'those Cresswells' would be coming to escort her to the Park. She started to her feet, and, going to her davenport, dashed off, sealed, and directed a very decided little note to Miss Florence Cresswell. Afterwards she rang the bell.

'Clochette, you will have this sent directly,' she said, when that important personage had made her appearance, keeping her back well turned to the maid lest the bright eyes of that damsel should mark the traces of tears still wet upon her cheeks.

'Yes, *miladi*,' said Clochette, throwing into her voice all the desolation of which it was capable. 'It is to the handsome *milor*, telling how that all is over between them,' she thought tragically, and was consequently much disgusted when she discovered that it was addressed, not to a handsome *milor*, but to a young and pretty 'mees.' 'Nevertheless there must be a rival,' remembered Clochette happily, and, much fortified by the remembrance, she carried the missive away in triumph.

And now poor little Lydia proceeded to brighten up and try to feel more comfortable. But, as Wednesday and Thursday came and went, and Friday followed suit, and still Lord Charles Fenton neither came nor sent, the comfort somehow vanished, and dull despair reigned in its stead.

On the Saturday morning she rose heavy-eyed and dejected, and with listless indifference put herself into Clochette's hands to be made ready for the day's campaign. The French maid was inconsolable. Never on any previous morning had her little mistress omitted to name the special dress she intended to wear. To-day she had only said, 'Anything you wish, Clochette,' which Clochette argued was 'a bad, bad sign.' When the task was finished, Lady Lydia, having made a sorry attempt at breakfast, went downstairs and into the small drawing-room, where she ensconced herself in her favourite seat in the window. Here she was just beginning to wonder, with the self-pitying sadness of youth, whether she should ever again return to her old bright, piquant spirits, when the door opened, and Lord Charles Fenton entered unannounced.

Lydia rose, pale and trembling. Fenton, coming across the room to meet her, caught sight of her face, and knew at once the game was in his own hands—that it was his turn now.

‘I have come to say “ Good-bye ” to you again,’ he began, in a tone cold and stern enough to freeze a salamander, ‘and to beg you will pardon me for any harsh or uncivil things I may have said to you at our last meeting.’

‘You are pardoned,’ said Lydia, with a touching attempt at dignity ; but, the poor child’s eyes being full of dismal tears, the effect was rather spoiled.

‘Thank you,’ returned Fenton. He had seen the tears, and his heart smote him. A sudden thaw fell over all his iciness, melting it away far out of sight, or feeling, for evermore. He moved over to the fireplace, and stood there irresolutely.

Lydia got up from her little cold corner in the window and also came over to the warmth, standing on the hearth-rug near him. It was May, but dismally severe and chilly. She felt cold, subdued, frightened. A faint longing came over her to be taken into some one’s—any one’s—arms, to be kissed and forgiven ; Lord Fenton, being the nearest to her at that present moment, would perhaps have done for this purpose as well as any one else. Presently, looking up, she found he was staring at her, and blushed crimson.

‘Lydia,’ began his lordship, in a low voice, ‘before I go away for—for perhaps years, there is something I wish very much to say to you. When you told me, on the last day I saw you, amongst many other hard things, that you particularly disliked me, of course I knew that any hopes of ever gaining you I might have been mad enough to entertain were at an end. But, lest you should still believe, as you did then, that I consider you “ frivolous,” or anything else but what is good and sweet, I have come here to-day to tell you that I love you with all my heart, and that I shall never marry now, as you are the only woman on earth I should care to call my wife.’

To this Lydia made no response, but stood with downcast eyes and flushed cheeks, and small white fingers nervously intertwining. A long silence ensued, lasting for several minutes—to Lydia it seemed like several years. Fenton broke it.

‘Was your ride on Tuesday last a very pleasant one?’ he asked, gently. And then Lydia found her voice.

‘I didn’t go riding at all,’ she cried, passionately. ‘The very moment after you left I wrote to Florence Cresswell, saying I would not go ; and I have never been out of the house ever since. And you never came to see me !’

Fenton changed colour, and made a step towards her.

‘Lydia, why did you do this?’ he asked, eagerly.

‘Ah—because I loved you!’ confessed poor little Lydia, and fairly burst out crying.

She did not regret either her confession or the tears which she finished in Lord Fenton’s arms—indeed, most of the latter I fancy were mysteriously kissed away—and they were both supremely happy for at least one hour. After that, as it was found necessary they should part for a little time, a reaction set in, and some sorrow was mingled with their joy.

When they had said ‘Good-bye’ for the third time, Fenton turned to Lydia once more.

‘And you are quite sure now, Lydia darling, that you don’t very particularly dislike me?’ he asked.

‘Oh, Charlie!’ cried Lady Lydia Farrington; whereupon they said ‘Good-bye’ for the fourth time, very tenderly.

Lord Charles Fenton did not go abroad that week, nor the next, nor for many weeks following, and when at length he did go he took with him the fairest little bride in Britain, whose name was LYDIA.

JOCELYNE.

‘This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.’

SHAKESPEARE.

IT was a brilliant morning, sweet and fresh, and full of early spring, with the sun shining as it seldom shines on ‘London town,’ and a little child—such a pretty little child she was!—dancing before a gaping crowd in the open air, with the mellow flecks of sunlight gleaming in and out amongst her golden curls. Her dress was tawdry, almost repulsive; her ribbons were faded past description; two of her tiny toes were peeping at the world through the soiled white-satin slippers. She was at best but a dusty travel-stained creature; but, with her blue eyes, deep and earnest—terribly earnest just then—her rose-tinged baby lips, and the wistful entreaty of her expression, she was at that moment a lovely living picture.

The young student standing on the outer edge of the thin crowd thought so, as he contrasted her curiously with her owner—the dullest mortal could not have named him as her father—who, with an ancient drum before him, and pandean-pipes nestled cosily amongst the filthy folds of his neck-cloth, was performing, with energy worthy of a better cause, ‘The Rakes of Mallow.’

The child danced, the beams of heaven sparkled, the idlers applauded, until at length the poor feet tired, and the large eyes grew larger and more earnest. The little one’s strength was evidently flagging. Louder and wilder grew ‘The Rakes of Mallow,’ as the man bent forward to frown heavily upon her. With a last faint effort the child bounded from side to side; but the grace, the elasticity, was gone: and with a curse the showman stopped abruptly, motioning her with a wave of the hand to cease and ask for alms.

Wearily and with reluctance she made her rounds. As she reached the student she paused, and he dropped a shilling into the tin plate that she held out to him. Instantly the miserable little face flushed and brightened so wonderfully that the young man, impulsively laying his hand upon her shoulder, asked her why she was pleased. Glancing at him timidly first, she next turned her gaze with much meaning towards the money. It was so much more than she had looked for.

‘Perhaps he will not beat me now,’ she whispered, with a deep-drawn sigh of hope, sadder than any weeping.

The lookers-on broke up and vanished. The showman, slinging his drum across his shoulder, went down the street, the child following. Behind them, at some short distance, came the student, unnoticed by them, and almost without purpose, until, having passed through lanes and alleys and noisome unknown spots, he saw the dancer and her guide disappear within the precincts of a dingy-looking house.

Up and down, outside this house, he paced for many minutes, amazed at his own folly, yet unable to tear himself away. He was haunted by the child’s face, by the sadness of her one remark. All the strong artist-soul within him was awakened, and cried aloud for another glimpse at the baby Love, the infant Venus, it had just beheld. As he lingered near the door that hid her a faint cry, checked but bitter, reached him; and in another moment he was half-way up the rotten stairs—up higher still—until he found himself within the room that held his lost charm—and her master.

In one corner she lay covering, piteously rubbing her right shoulder; her eyes had all their exquisite azure drowned in tears. As she saw him, she at once remembered his kindness, and, springing to his side, clung closely to him.

‘Save me,’ she gasped—‘save me!’

His hand, at sight of her distress, had been raised to strike the brute before him; but her touch restrained him. Although the young man’s blood was aflame, her face subdued him.

‘He has beaten me!’ sobbed the child in anguish, regardless of consequences. ‘He has hurt me! See!’ And with infantine recklessness she tore the ragged covering from her shoulder and disclosed a bruise—now red, but that shortly would be black—disfiguring the fairness of her flesh. The student’s anger increased. He was young and tender-hearted;

and, as the showman rose, muttering an evil word, and advanced towards the terrified child, he pushed him back.

'Will you sell the child?' he asked in the heat and uncertainty of the moment.

The showman drew back surprised.

'If I get my price,' he said sullenly.

'Ten pounds?'

'Make it fifteen, and she is yours,' said the other, brightening.

The student hesitated. To him the sum was large. Only that morning he had received his half-year's allowance from his miser uncle, and, were he now to part with this fifteen pounds, it would leave him only his brain and his ten fingers and thirty-five pounds to live on for the next six months. And then, when he had bought the child, what should he do with her? He hesitated. The little one, quick to perceive his indecision, tightened her hold upon him, and with passionate entreaty whispered—

'If you leave me now he will kill me! Buy me—oh, do, do buy me!'

Her tears fell fast; her eyes would not leave his own. He counted out the money silently. Throwing an old shawl about her, she slipped her hand within his, and together they left the room.

As they stood for a moment on the outer landing, a woman came hurriedly towards them. It was evident she had been listening to all that had passed within.

'So you are going, Jocelyne?' she said. 'Well, luck be with you! Here'—holding out to the stranger a dull-gold, inexpensive locket—'take this—it is hers. Some time she may be glad to have it.'

'That is to make me a lady one day,' said the child in her high treble, out of which every particle of sadness had vanished; 'oh, how I wish the time was come! Good-bye, Goody.'

'Good-bye,' echoed the woman carelessly, and moved away.

Down the stairs went the student and the dancer hand in hand. At the last step the child broke into glad sweet song. 'I am free, free, free!' she sang, like an escaped bird, while a thrill of ecstasy ran through her.

'She is happy—she is full of joy,' muttered the student, gazing in perplexity at the tiny transformed creature beside

him ; 'and why ? She has only been transferred from one vagrant to another—poor little beggar !'

'Where are we going now ?' asked the child gaily.

'I wish I knew,' said he.

Ten years afterwards in a pretty room, more carelessly than poorly furnished, sat a man, his elbows resting on a table, his head between his hands, staring blankly at a letter that lay before him. All about him reigned artistic confusion. Here and there lay brushes and pictures half begun ; on an easel near the window stood a large painting, almost completed ; exquisite sketches lined the walls ; a few portraits—for the most part of the same face with a different expression, or the same figure in a different attitude—lay scattered about.

The sunbeams, breaking in luxuriously on that June morning, flooded the room with light, and, flashing on the man's face, exaggerated the miserable despairing look of it. Unlike most people when first crushed by a great sorrow, George Blackwood fully realised on the moment all that this letter meant to him. Was it really ten years ago since he rescued little Jocelyne from the showman ? Ten long years ? It seemed but yesterday. Again he saw before him the pretty bruised shoulder, the pale uplifted face, the tear-dimmed eyes. He had bought her and taken her to his heart, and now he must lose her. She was his all—his life itself—the 'very eyes' of him ; yet already must he count her lost. She would go, carrying with her all the light in which he revelled, leaving him behind to endure the gloom alone.

The door opened.

'I am coming in,' called out some one gaily ; and then a young girl entered—a fairy, a beauty, more exquisite than a dream, although her gown was only of blue cotton, her only adornment a plain gold locket. Her hair, a rich wavy yellow, was gathered behind into a soft knot, her luminous eyes were purple, her lips coral.

As she approached his side, the painter did not raise his head, although her steps made his pulses throb. Slowly she advanced, at a loss how to account for the absence of the usual greeting, the half-playful, wholly-loving greeting.

'Why,' cried she at last, 'what is the matter ? Sir Knight of the Rueful Countenance, what aileth thee ? Don Quixote, do you know that your face is as long as my arm ?'

She slipped her soft white hand under his chin as she spoke, and compelled him to look at her. His grey eyes were almost stern in their sadness.

'Read that,' he said, putting the letter he had been mourning over into her hand.

At first, as she read, she made no sign, and then her colour rose, higher and richer; and, when at length she turned her wondering gaze upon him, he saw, with a pang the more, that into her eyes was come a marvellous gleam.

'Is it true,' she murmured breathlessly—'quite true—not a dream or a delusion? Oh, Don, it is impossible!'

'It is true,' he said, but the last faint spark of hope that he had encouraged unknown to himself died within him as he witnessed the intensity of her delight.

'True that I, the beggar-maid, the waif, am an Earl's granddaughter?' She asked the question with parted lips and lovely bewildered eyes. 'Don, come here and pinch me—I cannot be awake! Why, it is better than Hans Andersen, more wonderful than the "Arabian Nights"! Then, once more returning to the letter, she recited aloud such scraps of information as most astounded her. "'Stolen by her nurse when only two years old, through motives of revenge"—revenge for what, I wonder?—"and, later on, was given into the charge of the woman Grainger"—that indeed was Goody's name!—"had on her, at time of disappearing, a plain gold locket with initials, 'J. G.'" Yes, here they are. What do they stand for, Don?'

'"Jocelyne Gresham," your mother's maiden name.'

'Poor mother! And what am I now? Lady Jocelyne, or the Hon. Jocelyne, or what?'

'The Hon. Jocelyne.'

She burst into laughter, while he watched her—heart-broken.

'It is too good to be true,' she said. 'Do you remember how you used to call me your "Princess in disguise"? And see, your words were a prophecy! Oh, what good times we shall have now, what long, long holidays, what glorious drives, and the Opera *every* night! Of course I shall have plenty of money, and lots of pretty dresses and rings, and a carriage perhaps, and——'

'My poor child,' he interrupted sadly. 'have you been pining so much for all these things?'

'No, no, indeed!' cried she eagerly, running up to where

he had drawn himself apart from her into the window. 'Until now, when it dawned upon me that I might have them, I have never cared for them. But how sad you look, Don! Are you not glad that such good fortune has befallen me?'

'How can I be glad, Jocelyne, when its coming will take you from me?'

'Take me from you?'—in a changed low tone.

'Yes; of course you will go now to live with your grandfather.'

'Oh, must I do that?' she said; and her face fell, losing its joyous expression. But she did not repudiate the idea with scorn or anger; and something that was like anger against her coldness rose within him. At the moment he almost hated her.

'Do not break your heart about it,' he remarked, with a suppressed sneer. 'I dare say in a very little time you will adore this new relative. Think of all that lies before you, and never look back. It is a mistake.'

'I suppose I shall like him very well by-and-by, and—and all that,' said Jocelyne, still rueful; 'but I shall never love him as I love you, Don—never! After all, it is you who have been a real father to me, is it not? And such a nice handsome young father too!' she added, with a laugh.

Each sweet unblushing avowal stabbed him. He felt he could not bear much more of it.

'You had better run away now,' he said; 'I am expecting Lord Mayfair every moment. There—was not that a knock? Now go.'

'Already? Well'—with an air of decision—'I want to see him too, so I shall remain.'

'No; I wish to see him alone first. Go, Jocelyne.'

He used a tone of command which she at least had never heard from him before, and she obeyed. Standing half in and half out of the door-way leading into an adjoining apartment, she spoke again hurriedly, her courage failing at the last moment.

'If he should be cross, Don, or proud, or disagreeable in any way, you will let me stay with you? Promise me that. Quick—I hear him!'

'You shall decide for yourself,' said Blackwood coldly.

'Remember what you say. You will not coerce me in any way? If I wish to remain, you will stand by me?'

‘You shall do as you will,’ he said again; and almost as the one door closed on her retreating figure the other opened to admit her grandfather.

He was an old man of middle height, with a gentle, weak, aristocratic face. Seeing the painter before him, he bowed.

‘Mr. Blackwood, I presume?’ he said; and Blackwood, coming forward, handed him a chair, and at once plunged into the dreaded subject.

The Earl’s story was long and tedious, the painter’s short and concise. No doubt about her being the long-lost child could possibly remain. At the end the old man said huskily—

‘I cannot thank you—no words could tell you how I feel—yet I am here now only to do you an injury—to rob you of the child you love! Mr. Blackwood, is there nothing I can do for you?’

‘Nothing, my lord,’ said the painter briefly.

‘When may I see her?’

‘Now, at once. She is awaiting your summons. May I ask when’—he stopped to clear his throat—‘you intend taking her away with you?’

‘To-day,’ said Lord Mayfair, with a gesture of surprise—‘I thought from my letter you would understand. It will be better so. You see, sir’—speaking very gently—‘you are a young man, and she must have outgrown her childhood, and—and——’

‘My aunt has lived with me ever since I—found Jocelyne,’ interrupted the painter haughtily.

‘Of course, of course; I quite comprehend. Still——’

‘To-day?’ broke out the other, with sudden passion. ‘Must it indeed be so soon? In one hour to tear asunder the links that years have forged! Is she to be as nothing to me now, when countless memories have united us for so long? To you, this child, with all her pretty ways, is unknown; to me—— Why I bought her—made her mine, as I madly hoped, for ever—does that give me no claim upon her?’

‘Sir, if I might be allowed to——’

‘What!’ cried the young man fiercely, springing to his feet; and then, breaking into a bitter laugh, ‘forgive me, my lord,’ he said; ‘but if you only knew all! I had her so cheap—my poor child!’

There was such infinite yearning love and pity in his tones that Mayfair’s heart, which was a tender one, bled for him.

‘You shall see her now,’ said Blackwood gently, and, opening the door, he called ‘Jocelyne’ twice. Then, as he heard her step approaching, he went out, and let them meet unseen.

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She was gone. Already she had ceased to be part of his daily life. She had demurred a good deal to such a sudden departure, and had shed many sincere and loving tears ; but she had at length consented, and the old house would know her no more. Just at the last Blackwood had said to her, ‘Well, Jocelyne, you see I have kept my promise ; I told you you should decide for yourself.’ It was the only reproach he had allowed himself to utter, and he had said it smiling. But, when she was indeed gone, and the door had closed behind her, he had flung himself face downwards upon the table, and for long hours had lain there motionless as one dead.

.

Two years passed away—two years of great success and utter heart-loneliness for Blackwood. During the first miserable months after Jocelyne’s departure, out of his wretchedness he had conceived and sent forth into the world a picture that was destined to make him famous. The wonderful thing that for long years had been his dream by day and night had at last come true—his name would live—his praise was in all men’s mouths ; while Fortune, with her fine disregard of economy, had at the same time thrown to him yet another boon ; for Death had loosed his uncle’s hands from off his money-bags, and they, coming to Blackwood, had made him rich. Yet all was as nothing to him for the want of her he loved. Determinately as he had tried to live the feeling down, he still pined for the sight of two blue eyes, for the touch of Jocelyne’s cool little fingers, the music of her voice.

With Jocelyne the time had been spent in idle, happy wandering. From city to city, from capital to capital, the old man had taken her, feasting her eyes on all that was fairest and most choice—educating her in the fullest sense of the word. Admiration, love, variety, all that a woman most craves, was hers ; she reigned a little queen in her own circle, both by virtue of her great beauty and the fortune that should one day be hers ; yet, on this her first morning in London,

after her return home, as she unclosed her violet eyes and flung her white arms above her head in lazy wakening, her one thought was—‘To-day I shall see Don.’

Later on, when luncheon was over, she turned to her grandfather.

‘I want to go and see Don,’ she said.

‘Whom, my pet?’

‘Don Quixote.’

‘Oh, Mr. Blackwood! Well, so you shall some day.’

‘No, not some day—to-day—this very moment!’

‘But, my darling, you know you promised Nugent to ride with him.’

‘Oh, never mind the little Viscount! Too much of anything is good for nothing, and I am weary of Nugent. Let me assure myself that he can exist without seeing me for one whole day. Perhaps—if he survives—he may have something to say to-morrow that I have not already heard a thousand times.’

‘I wish you would be a little more civil to him, Jocelyne,’ said the Earl coaxingly. ‘You know how highly I think of him; and—and he is the best match this season.’

‘Dear grandpapa, you forget. Is there not a Prince somewhere still unwedded? I reserve myself for Royalty!’ declared the spoiled beauty, making an adorable little *moue* at her own lovely image in an opposite glass. ‘But about Don—you will come with me, grandpa?’

‘Of course,’ said he, perhaps in his heart relieved that his wilful charge had not elected to go alone.

.

As they entered the painter’s studio, Blackwood—whose thoughts had been with her all the day, but who had not dared to hope so soon for her coming—rose to receive them. He was strangely pale, and looked older than his thirty-one years. By a supreme effort he controlled himself, and succeeded in greeting them calmly, if coldly.

Was this Jocelyne—this radiant being in trailing silks and all the pretty devices of a last fashion? How unlike the child in blue cotton—yet how like, and, alas, how much more beautiful! All at once he realised how vain had been that cruel torturing of himself; his love rose high above all chains—he was hers for good or evil on this side of the grave.

The Earl, watching him narrowly, never guessed at all

this—the man was so calm, so self-possessed, showed such a curious want of feeling, the terrible struggle within him making him curt and cold beyond his wont. Once, as Jocelyne stood somewhat apart, he asked her—

‘Are you happy?’

And she answered him, with a little smiling nod—

‘Very happy;’ then prettily, ‘but all the more so now that I have seen you again. I felt a want before.’

The sweet words warmed his frozen heart. He could not resist smiling back an answer to them, and then hated himself for having done so. She was no longer anything to him that he should feel pleasure at the kind words that probably meant so little.

‘Prince Charming has not arrived yet?’ he asked, prompted by the consuming fear within him.

‘No, indeed; and he would be wiser not, unless he wished a cold reception.’

‘How cruel of you! But some day you will think differently.’

‘Shall I? Why, you are as bad as grandpapa!’ said she, with a lovely pout. ‘All the morning he has been tormenting me to marry, marry, marry. Am I then so bad to look at that I must hurry my misfortune?’

‘Then there is some one?’ he asked carelessly, but paling a little.

‘Yes. I don’t mind telling you—you remember how I used to tell you everything that concerned my stupid self? It is Lord Nugent; and it vexes grandpa that I cannot bring myself to think him perfection. Not but what he is a nice boy rather; only all boy-lovers are so—so—sugary! Any other kind is preferable.’

‘There are others?’—he could question her only in a dull heavy way.

‘Oh, yes’—holding up ten little fingers—‘more than I can count—young, old, and middle-aged! I think I like the old ones best, they are so good-natured, and give one such pretty presents. And the fun of it is’—laughing—‘grandpa lets me take anything from them, though I must take only flowers and bonbons and that from the boys—’

‘Jocelyne, I fear we must be going,’ broke in the Earl, coming lingeringly back to her. He was a connoisseur of pictures, and had been engrossed by one all this time.

.

After this Blackwood saw a good deal of Jocelyne. She would run in and out between three and six during the long spring evenings, generally accompanied by her duenna, a pleasant-faced old lady of about sixty, and once or twice, for a few moments, alone; and each day the struggle to conceal his love from her grew fiercer. She would tell him all her merry secrets, and her few troubles—how she had finally rejected Nugent, and thereby very much angered her grandfather—not that her grandfather was ever really angry with her—so it did not greatly matter; now there was some one else on the *tapis* , but him she liked just as little; and so on.

All this innocent prattle tortured the jealous heart that listened. Blackwood was haunted by the fear of a day that might—nay, must—come, when she would come in there, and, with sweet shy blushes, tell him how at last her choice was made, her young love given, and then—— He would put a stop to it. She should come there no more. Death at once was to be chosen before this daily dying.

One day, as he was in this mood, she ran in alone.

‘I have just five minutes,’ she said, ‘and then I am due at Lady Brand’s. I never saw anyone look so ill as you, Don! What are you doing with yourself? Give up that nasty painting for just this one day, and come with us to Lady Brand’s; she takes it quite to heart that you never go there now.’

‘I am particularly busy to-day, so you must excuse me; and, besides, I cannot say I greatly care to associate with the silly set of people she chooses to gather around her.’

‘Oh! Am I a silly person, Don? No!’—holding up a warning finger—‘don’t say it. I can see by your eyes you have something withering at the very tip of your tongue. Oh, what a glorious day it is—but too warm!’

She tilted her cream-coloured hat a little backwards, so that it sat on her head sideways, and added the charm of innocent coquetry to her appearance. Her very beauty irritated him.

‘Put your hat straight,’ he said unkindly.

‘Is it unbecoming?’ asked Jocelyne. She went over to a mirror and put her hat back into its proper position; then she came to his side. ‘What is it? How have I vexed you? Do you not then love me any more?’ She asked all these questions in the pretty, soft beseeching voice she might have used five years before.

The painter gazed up steadily into her face; she was bending slightly over him. A minute that was a lifetime passed so, and then he conquered. No—she should never know how madly he loved her.

‘What a little coquette you are!’ he exclaimed, with a cold smile.

‘Now I shall tell you all about last night,’ she said, settling herself cosily into an arm-chair. ‘I can assure you you lost by not being there. I was never at so good a ball—and never enjoyed myself so much.’

‘Which means that you made several new conquests, and sent one or more men home broken-hearted. That is the keenest enjoyment a young lady of the present day knows.’

‘Don’t bite your moustache quite through, Don,’ said Jocelyne, as yet undismayed; ‘the only merit a fair moustache can claim is its length. Yes—I certainly did make a conquest last night, but I didn’t get the chance of refusing any one—so you are wrong there.’

‘Another! Why, you are a perfect warrior!’ he exclaimed bitterly. ‘An Indian with his belt full of scalps would be a mere trifle in the battle-field compared with you! May I ask the name of your latest victim?’

‘No, you may not. I don’t care about conversing with ill-tempered people,’ said Jocelyne, rising with much dignity. ‘Because your cook, or your man, or your chosen friend has annoyed you is no reason why you should vent your suppressed rage upon me. I shall come here no more. Perhaps that will please you.’

‘Yes, it will,’ retorted Blackwood, rising too, and growing very pale; ‘nothing will please me better. You disturb me and waste my time with your frivolous tales of lovers unworthy to bear the name. Go, and do not return—it will be better for us both. Forgive me if I am rude; only—go.’

‘You need not say it again,’ said Jocelyne, who was looking almost tall, and very proud, and whose eyes were filled with tears.

She made him a little dignified curtsy, and left the room—for ever, as he thought; she could scarcely forgive the grossness of his behaviour. So he fell into despair, and could neither eat nor sleep.

Nevertheless, at four o’clock the very next day, there came a low knock at his door.

‘Come in,’ said he wearily.

The door was opened partially, but the visitor—whoever it was—apparently had some doubts about the propriety of entering.

‘Come in!’—impatiently.

‘Oh, but I’m afraid!’ murmured a voice that made Don spring from his chair. Only just now he had been thinking he should never see her again!

‘Is it you, Jocelyne?’ he cried eagerly, going to the door, and drawing her in by both hands.

‘Yes’—demurely; then—with a pretended glance of amazement from under her long lashes—‘and, positively, I do believe you are glad to see me!’

‘Glad!’

‘Well, so you should be after your scandalous conduct of yesterday. You were very near never having that pleasure again. Why, Don, how worn you look! Have you really been repenting in sackcloth and ashes for your sins against me?’

‘I have neither eaten nor slept,’ he said. ‘I thought you would not forgive—and you have overlooked my fault so soon.’

‘Yes, I know I am sadly wanting in proper feeling. But’—severely—‘to starve yourself—how extremely wrong of you! You shall have something to eat this very moment. I saw the luncheon laid as I came in. No, don’t ring; I will attend to you myself, and scold you all the time.’

She rustled out of the room in her pretty vivacious way, without giving him leisure to protest; so that he was constrained to follow her. When in the luncheon-room, she hovered round him, pouring him out some wine—cutting the bread even—while he, looking on, had not the courage to interfere, so exquisite was the pleasure it gave him to see her do it. He tried to eat, but failed. When he had drunk a glass of wine, he rose.

‘I cannot eat,’ he said, with a smile—‘you have sufficed me. Now will you tell me all I refused to hear yesterday? There was some one new——’

‘No, I was only joking. But I am in fresh trouble. Lord Blunden—you remember, I met him two months ago—spoke to grandpa yesterday, and told him I was the light of his eyes, and all the rest of it; and grandpa thinks I should listen to him. Do you know the man, Don?’

‘Yes; he is a dark handsome man. I know him very well.’

‘And don’t like him? Well, neither do I; so we won’t

waste any more time talking about him. What I really came for to-day was to tell you I am going down to Ivors to-morrow, and to make you promise to come to my birthday ball next month.'

'But, my dear child, it is so long——'

'I don't care how long it is. I don't care if it is a hundred years since you were last at a ball. I intend you shall come to mine. Now—do you hear?—I insist. You owe me some reparation, so you can't refuse. Good-bye, Don—I must run away; but say "Yes" before I go.'

'Yes, he said, unable to resist.

. . .

In Jocelyne's pretty boudoir that night high argument was being held. Lord Mayfair, hot and irritated, was standing opposite his granddaughter, with uplifted finger, making a vain effort to induce her to listen to reason; while she, in her pale-green ball-dress and water-lilies, and with her lips and eyes alike mutinous, was plainly and shamefully rebellious.

'I confess I cannot understand you,' said the Earl plaintively. 'Last week you showed yourself thoroughly gracious to him, and to-night you would not spare him even one dance. It is—it must be—mere caprice. He complained to me bitterly about it.'

'I hate tell-tales,' returned Jocelyne frowning. 'Is he afraid of me that he must employ a go-between? Last week I looked upon him merely as a friend, and could afford to be civil. He has put it out of my power to do so any longer.'

'Now what objection can you possibly have to Blunden?' asked her grandfather in despair. 'You refused Nugent because, you said, his nose was not in the middle of his face—an absurd remark that could be applied to any one. But Blunden is acknowledged by all to be a remarkably handsome fellow—the handsomest in town.'

'He isn't half so handsome as Don,' replied Jocelyne provokingly.

The Earl turned upon her angrily.

'It is always Don,' he said. 'I am sick of the name. One would think it was Mr. Blackwood you wanted to marry.'

There was dead silence. A cold hand seemed to have suddenly clutched at the girl's heart. These few idle words had done for her what two long years had failed to do. She

stood for a full minute as if turned to stone. Did she love him? Slowly her colour faded until cheeks and brow and lips were white as snow. Then she turned and sought her own room. Throwing herself, dressed as she was, upon her bed, she fought a long battle with her heart through all that night season, until, as the morning dawned, she knew.

The next day she left London and went down to Ivors without seeing Blackwood again, to spend each quiet hour in troubled thought. She was now assured of her own feelings; but could she answer for him? He was always so cold, so indifferent—no little word that she could remember had ever escaped him; and yet—— She alternated between fear and hope, one moment possessed with doubt, the next sustained by some fitful rapturous gleam of certainty.

As the morning of her birthday broke to let the many gifts from every side pour in, and no mark, no token of affection, came from him, her hopes fell dead. And when at night she stood, robed in white satin, beside her grandfather to receive her guests, there was a sickening dread within her that at the last the one she loved might fail in coming; so that, when he did come, she could greet him only with lips as white as her gown and a smile so faint as to be almost imperceptible.

He noticed it, and wondered at the change, and grew uneasy about it. When she danced with him she was silent—the gay debonair child was gone, leaving a silent, absent girl in her place. As the night wore on, and, watching her, he noticed that with others she was almost her own gay self again—that with him alone she was different—there grew upon him a determination to know the worst.

He found her standing by the open door of the conservatory, alone, gazing into the quiet night.

‘How cool it looks out there!’ she said as he approached.

‘Will you come and see how cool?’ he asked; and, as she acquiesced, he put a shawl round her, and together they went down the steps into the garden beneath.

In silence they walked down gravelled paths, past sleeping flowers, under the lonely sighing trees, until, having left behind them all frequented spots, they emerged suddenly upon the borders of the lake, over which the white moon had flung a silver veil.

Jocelyne had never spoken since they left the house; and now, standing beside the water, she had thrown back from her throat and arms her white wrap as though unable to

endure even so much covering. Her thoughts—where were they? Blackwood hardly dared to speak. Was this strange pain at his heart the presentiment of coming evil? He gazed at the stars studding the mighty dome above him, and at last could bear the silence no longer.

‘Jocelyne, what is it?’ he said.

She glanced at him with half-frightened, half-inquiring eyes, but made no reply.

‘There is something wrong. Nay, child, you cannot deceive me—tell me what it is. Where is all the gaiety, the brightness, that should be yours—and this your birthday too? Tell me, what troubles you?’

Still she made him no answer—only turned her little white throat restlessly from side to side, as though seeking escape.

‘Is it about Lord Blunden?’ he asked in a choked voice.

‘Yes,’ she said, catching eagerly at the suggestion, though Blunden was never farther from her thoughts. ‘You know he came down early this morning, and after dinner he was foolish enough—— Of course I refused him; and now they will all be angry, and say I have again done unwisely. It is always the same; and yet what do they want? Am I to marry to please them or to please myself?’ She finished a little wrathfully, through her agitation.

There was a long pause. Some tiny, foolish songster, mistaking the brilliant moon for a faded sun, broke into a joyous melody, but, discovering his error, quickly subsided into a sleepy trill, and then once more into silence. The sorrowful lap of the wavelets alone disturbed the calm.

‘Jocelyne,’ said Blackwood in a low tone, ‘why is it “always the same”? Is it—is it because you love another?’

‘Yes,’ answered the girl faintly.

It was come at last. He almost staggered as the trembling word reached his ear. Then an overmastering desire to know the name of him who had gained his all took possession of him. He caught her arm roughly.

‘Who is it? Speak!’ he exclaimed passionately.

Jocelyne burst into tears. She was already overwrought, and the sudden vehemence of his touch unhinged her.

‘You—you—you!’ she cried, flinging out with a gesture that was almost reckless her bare white arms towards him in the moonlight. For a moment she stood so, then, covering her face with her hands, she shrank away. ‘Ah, what have

I said? What have I done?' she sobbed. She was in his arms.

'If you are lying, I will kill you!' he said. 'Say it again!' Then, in a changed tone—'My sweet, my angel, is it indeed the truth? Can it be true?'

'And you, Don?'

But, though she asked the question, she hardly heeded the answer, his look, his touch, the tender passion of his voice being all-convincing. He bent his face to hers—for four long years he had not kissed her—and now their lips met as they had never met before.

Just before they returned to the house, he put his hand beneath her chin, and, raising her face until he could gaze clearly down into the pure violet of her eyes, said almost sadly—

'Beloved, have you thought of everything?—all you must renounce—not wealth, perhaps, but rank—you, who might have been—— Think of all you will lose.'

'Nay,' she answered sweetly, her red lips parting in a fond smile, her eyes gleaming darker through tears of joy, 'how can I, when it is so immeasurably outweighed by all that I shall gain?'

THE WITCHING HOUR.

‘The ghost, if ghost it were, seem’d a sweet soul.’

Don Juan.

‘I’m very sorry, mum, but I can’t help it. I’ve struggled against my feelins most manful, but I know I couldn’t spend another night beneath this roof for untold gold.’

‘This is dreadful,’ says Mrs. Vernon, rising from her chair—an expression of despair overspreading her gentle features. ‘This is the third servant I have lost this week—first Hardy, then Jane, and now you. I don’t know what is to be done, I’m sure.’

‘Tell us all about it, cook,’ puts in a pretty plaintive voice that betrays a certain amount of languor. The voice belongs to Dolores, who, looking up with much interest from amongst her pillows, pushes back the lace curtains of the window, the better to see cook, who is standing, florid and melancholy, in the centre of the drawing-room.

‘I’ll tell you all I know, Miss Vernon—and, to my thinking, that is too much. Of course, if it was only hearsay, I’d hold my tongue; but, when it comes to seeing with my own two eyes, there’s an end of everything. The maids had been talking awful, as you know; but, as they young things often have the skeers for want of something better to do, I didn’t believe ’em—until last night.’ Mrs. Mashem pauses.

‘I feel as if I were going to have the “skeers” myself!’ interposes Dolores softly.

‘As I was going to bed, miss, the neuralgia came on me dreadful, and I said to myself I’d go and ask your maid for the laudanum. It was about twelve, or it might be one—I won’t swear to a minit—when, just as I reached the corridor that opens off the picture-gallery, I looked down, and there, just at the very end of it, mounting the stone stairs that lead to the turret, I saw what made my blood run cold!’

Again cook pauses to fan her fevered brow. Mrs. Vernon sinks back into her chair; Dolores lays down her book.

'Oh, do go on, cook!' says the latter, who is evidently beginning to enjoy herself immensely. 'You are immeasurably better than anything Mr. Mudie can supply. You are positively thrilling. It must be so delicious this weather to feel one's blood "run cold."'

'It was a figure, miss,' continues cook gravely—'the tallest I ever see—covered with a long white trailing garmint, and with something on to its head. It walked very majestic like; and I think,' adds cook in a sepulchral tone—'though I won't vow to it—that there was dark spots upon the garmint—spots of blood! Anyhow, it went right upstairs before my very eyes to the room where master's great-grandfather's lady cut her throat.'

'But, cook,' interposes Mrs. Vernon very meekly, 'Mr. Vernon's great-grandfather's lady didn't cut her throat at all.'

'Well, mum, they say she did,' replies cook, with deep respect.

'Mamma, please do not interrupt Mrs. Mashem,' says Dolores; 'I am absolutely consumed with a desire to know all. Finish, cook.'

'Well, miss, the sperrit disappeared round the corner, and entered your painting-room—which I really think, Miss Dolores, you ought never to paint there again, leastways by yourself. My heart stopped beating, my 'air rose on my 'ead, and—begging your pardon, mum—the water just dropped off my face. I'm not ashamed to say I bolted; an' I verily believe, had I found Mary's door fastened against me, I should ha' swooned on the spot!'

Here cook, who is a devoted admirer of 'penny dreadfuls' and her own powers of eloquence, pauses through lack of breath.

'It is the most unfortunate thing I ever heard of,' says poor Mrs. Vernon.

'It is the very funniest thing I ever heard of,' puts in Dolores, who, in spite of her still weak health, is shaking with laughter.

'I wish, cook, you would think it over,' says Mrs. Vernon. 'I am so sorry you are going.'

'So am I, mum,' returns cook, honestly affected. 'I can't bear to leave a 'ouse that suits me as this does, an' which I 'ope 'umbly I also suited; but I couldn't get my 'ealth 'ere, mum, I'm that nervous.'

‘How can you laugh, Dolores?’ says Mrs. Vernon reproachfully.

‘How can I help it, you mean, when I think of cook “nervious,” and with her “air” on end?’ answers Dolores, and then, turning to the servant, she adds, ‘Oh, cook, I think it is very unkind of you to forsake me, when you know I can eat nothing since my illness but what is made by your own hands! You will drive me to distraction—and Italy, a month before my time, as, if I remain here, I know I shall be starved to death.’

‘An’ a good thing too, Miss Dolores,’ says cook solemnly; ‘a flitting is the best thing could appen you. For when ghosts come into a ’ouse no one can say what will turn up.’

‘Well, well, cook, it can’t be helped,’ says Mrs. Vernon hastily, yet with regret. And cook, having made an elaborate curtsy, withdraws.

‘What is to be done?’ asks Mrs. Vernon, turning to her daughter. ‘The matter grows serious. I almost’—with a slight laugh—‘begin to believe in this tiresome ghost myself. How on earth did they hear of that woman who cut her throat?’

‘I thought you said she didn’t,’ says Dolores, surprised.

‘No; I merely parried the thrust. Cook said your “great-grandfather’s lady.” Now it was his steward’s wife who went mad, poor soul, and cut her throat, or stabbed herself, or did something equally horrid in that room.’

‘In my painting-room?’ says Dolores, opening her great violet eyes to their widest. ‘How shocking! Now why did she choose that room of all others? I must say I think it is very rude of people to go about cutting their throats all over other people’s houses. I sha’n’t be able to paint there in comfort for the future. I shall always be fancying I see unpleasant-looking ladies hovering around me, with their heads under their arms.’

‘I shall be glad of anything that keeps you from stooping over your painting. It is ruining your health. Have you forgotten the terrible fever you have just come through? And can’t you see you can never get strong without perfect rest? You are too excitable, child, and your painting makes your brain run riot.’

‘I am infatuated about my last picture, I confess,’ returns Dolores, laughing and colouring until all her delicate pale little face is pink as a June rose; ‘sometimes I even dream of it.’

‘I wonder what we shall get for dinner to-day?’ says

Mrs. Vernon presently, in a moody tone. 'I shudder when I think of it. I can telegraph to town, of course, and have another woman in time for to-morrow's dinner; but nothing can redeem to-night's. And Frank here, too! It is really more than provoking!'

'I dare say even Frank can exist on cold roast beef for one night—or whatever it may chance to be,' remarks Dolores coldly, with a little scornful uplifting of her chin; whereupon her mother regards her with some scrutiny and a good deal of carefully-suppressed disappointment.

'Have you and Frank been quarrelling?' Mrs. Vernon asks after a pause. 'Now you speak of him always with a sneer or a shrug, and only a few days ago I had hoped—I think him so much to be liked.'

'So do I.'

'Is he not very agreeable?'

Dolores laughs again, but there is a faint suspicion of constraint in her merriment this time.

'Very,' she says; 'and he has a charming property quite close to ours, and it would be so delightful to have me always near you; and he is so fond of you, and he loves papa quite like a son! Isn't that it? I think I have heard it all a thousand times. But I don't want to get married, and I shall be nearer to you here in my own home than I can be anywhere else. Mamma, come here and give me a kiss. You know you are always the prettiest creature in the world; but, when you have that would-be reproachful look in your lovely eyes, you are irresistible, and I adore you!'

Mrs. Vernon succumbs to her charmer, and bends with a smile to receive and return the soft hug bestowed upon her by her spoiled darling; after which she goes away sighing to relate her woes to her husband.

Hardly has she left the drawing-room when the door is once more opened, and a young man comes in. He is tall, broad-shouldered, and bronzed. He is, in fact, one of those people it does one good to look at, though just now his handsome kindly face wears a discontented—not to say aggrieved—expression very foreign to it.

'You?' says Miss Dolores, letting her eyes rest indolently upon him. 'Talk of somebody——'

'Were you talking of me? How unfortunate I am! Beyond a doubt then you were saying something disparaging,' rejoins the young man, a shade of bitterness in his tone.

‘As usual’—carelessly—‘you wrong me. I think, on the contrary, I was saying something good. Let me see’—with the indifferent air of one who seeks to recall some trivial matter scarcely worth remembrance—‘I was just saying that you had a charming property, and that you managed it marvellously, that you were passable in appearance, and had very reasonable manners.’

‘I’m sure I’m infinitely obliged—though perhaps it can hardly be called praise to say a man has a large property.’

‘Excellent praise, I think, as the world goes. Surely it is ever so much better than having a large heart. That would be too *rococo* a possession nowadays—and you at least need not be accused of it. You are ungrateful. I really think I said all I could for you.’

‘I can quite understand that. It would indeed be abject folly on my part to come to *you* for a character. However, it was exceedingly good of you to speak about me at all. Did you say anything else?’

‘How you cross-examine! Yes, I believe I did’—lazily unfurling a huge white fan and waving it to and fro. ‘I said I didn’t care much about you—as I never fancy people who—don’t fancy me.’

‘I don’t believe you said that.’

‘No? You are in one of your taking moods to-day. I am afraid I spoke prematurely just now when I accredited you with good manners. Nevertheless I *did* say all that.’

‘You may have said it’—with some indignation. ‘You certainly didn’t mean all of it.’

‘I did mean all of it.’

‘You can tell me honestly that you believe from your heart I don’t care for you! Dolores, how can you speak like that? You know you are the only woman on earth I love.’

‘The last woman, you mean.’

‘The first and last. Why don’t you understand me? Is it that you won’t? Only ten days ago I madly hoped you were beginning to care for me a little, and suddenly you accepted a most frivolous excuse to break off with me entirely.’

‘No two persons agree on certain subjects. Of course it is impossible to know what may seem frivolous in your eyes; but to know you had been head over ears in love with my own cousin only a month ago didn’t seem to me a frivolous excuse for refusing to listen longer to your ridiculous speeches.’

Mr. Harley does not like to hear his vows of affection called 'ridiculous speeches.' He colours, and feels that he is growing angry.

'I have told you over and over again,' he says, with a visible effort at calmness that only betrays more surely the ill-temper that is mastering him, 'that your cousin is either making a very curious mistake or—telling a falsehood.'

A sudden flame of wrath flashes from Dolores' great violet eyes.

'Say nothing uncivil of Felicia,' she says warmly; 'she is truth itself. I have known her all my life. She is incapable of falsehood.'

'Then it is inexplicable. You say Felicia is truth itself, and yet what is it she says?'

'Do you want to hear again?' asks Dolores, drawing a letter from the pocket of her white gown. 'Well, you shall, if only to refresh your memory, though I hardly think it requires it.'

Opening the dainty scented epistle in her hand, she reads—

"So Mr. Harley—my Mr. Harley, as I used to call him—is staying with you. How strangely things happen! I did not know you and he were acquainted."

'Nor were we a month ago,' puts in Dolores, in a tone that plainly expresses deep regret that such an acquaintance-ship should have been formed.

Mr. Harley winces.

'It was indeed an evil wind that drove me to this place after an absence of so many years,' he says in return. 'Pray go on.'

"I knew he was leaving town for a short time, and going into Leicestershire, but had no idea his destination was the Towers until I heard from you. Is he not *beau garçon*, and very much as he ought to be? I shall be quite disappointed if you don't agree with me, as I honestly confess to a little tenderness in that direction. Indeed I should be ungrateful otherwise, as, when here, he was my shadow, and a very substantial one. At balls, operas, small-and-earlies, everywhere, he was always by my side. I found him everything that was delightful, and evidently he found me the same. Though I have had a good many lovers in my time, I don't think I ever had one so utterly 'mine own' as this one. By-the-by, dearest, how shockingly you scribble! One can hardly make out——"

'There—I needn't go on,' says Dolores, half impatiently; 'that is quite enough.'

'Quite too much. Of course in town one meets the same people night after night at every ball that comes off; and your cousin and I were very good friends. But she must be very conceited to imagine that, because I was seen at Lady B.'s or C.'s, I went there expressly to meet her. Besides, there was another fellow. It is really too absurd! May I see the letter?'

'Certainly. It is "Harley," is it not?'

'It might be anything, I think. I never saw so careless a hand.'

'It is very like mine,' returns Dolores.

'I wish,' says the young man very earnestly, 'you would write and ask your cousin about this.'

'Oh, no!' answers Miss Vernon hastily, with a vivid blush; then provokingly, as though to condone the blush—'it would be too much trouble.'

'I forgot that. As I said before, this letter has afforded you the excuse you wanted.'

'I think you are extremely rude,' says Miss Vernon calmly.

'Well'—with growing vehemence—'is there no reason in what I say? Only a fortnight ago you almost promised to be my wife, and now you positively seem to hate me. What am I to think?'

'What am I to think?'—with an expressive glance at the luckless letter.

'I shall go back to town to-morrow,' proceeds Harley, after a moody silence spent in twisting an unoffending button off his waistcoat.

'You needn't show such unflattering haste to be gone,' says Dolores deliberately. 'Felicia is coming down here next week.'

Harley turns pale, and, throwing up his head with a gesture full of haughtiness, turns his face to hers. His eyes are stern, but filled with a certain reproach.

'Because you are a woman,' he says, in a low tone, 'is a principal reason why you should not offer me an insult. I have already told you that your cousin's coming or going is of no consequence to me.'

Dolores is a little subdued by this unexpected outburst.

'I am sorry if I have offended you,' she says quietly. 'I

am also sorry you should decide on leaving the Towers so soon. Why go yet ?'

'Why stay ? I am only a nuisance to myself and—you !'

'Oh, no ! Surely the house is large enough for us all. You need not annoy me. Besides—you don't annoy me. Indeed'—with an odd little smile, sweet as it is swift, and just one straight glance upwards from the azure eyes—'I shall quite miss you, because—— How uncomfortable these pillows are ! Would it'—another glance—'trouble you very much to shake them up a little ? Thank you ! I was saying if you desert me I shall positively miss you, because then I shall have no one to quarrel with, except the ghosts. Ah, that reminds me. Our particular ghost has come again !'

'Has it ?' with much surprise. He is beginning to feel considerably better. 'I hoped it was laid for ever. Any more domestics showing signs of distress ? Tell me about it.'

'I shall be delighted'—demurely—'if you will only sit down, and not look as though you were going to start for London this moment.'

Then she tells him all about the spirit's latest appearance, the trailing garments, and Mrs. Mashem's flight.

'Perhaps after all you were wise when you talked of going,' she says, when her tale has come to an end. 'We sha'n't have any dinner to-night, and probably no breakfast in the morning. I doubt if you will get anything beyond prison fare for the next few days. Nevertheless, I think it would be cowardly of you to leave me here all alone to be devoured by a horrid ghost.'

Mr. Harley smiles ; and nothing more is said just then about leaving the Towers.

That evening, when dinner is over, and the servants have taken their lingering departure, and Miss Vernon is beginning to grow happy over her fruit, Mr. Vernon says suddenly and without preamble, in his usual clear and healthy tone—

'Something must be done.'

A faint pause follows this obscure speech. Then Dolores says with the utmost *bonhomie*—

'I always agree with you, papa, don't I ? But I confess I should like to know what is the "thing," and who is to do it.'

'Your mother has been telling me everything,' explains Mr. Vernon ; 'and the loss of a cook is no joke. This trick—for such it is I feel convinced—must be exposed, this fictitious ghost unearthed. Mrs. Mashem is a very sensible woman,

and the finest hand at white soup I know ; and I don't believe she ever fainted without just cause.'

'She didn't faint, papa. She only "swooned,"' says Dolores meekly.

'Well, I really think there is something in it,' returns her father.

'And I think I would do almost anything for the one who would discover the imposture,' says Dolores dreamily, gazing—as though unconsciously, as though without ulterior meaning—at Harley.

'I shall sit up myself to-night from twelve to two,' declares Mr. Vernon, with the air of a hero. Mr. Vernon dearly loves his bed.

'Oh, Harry,' says his wife nervously, 'I hope you won't dream of such a thing! Remember the attack you had on your chest last year. Surely one of the men can do it?' Deep in the recesses of Mrs. Vernon's heart—where she hopes it will rest undiscovered—lies a real and palpable fear of this nocturnal visitant, a fear that drives her to bed at eleven o'clock sharp, and compels her, when any suspicious noises make themselves heard during the small hours, to smother her head beneath the bed-clothes.

'Tut, nonsense, my dear, my chest is as strong as ever it was!' returns Mr. Vernon, who would have scorned to confess to a malady of any sort.

'Papa, you are not to sit up,' says Dolores promptly. 'I sha'n't allow it; I forbid it altogether; so put it out of your head.' She accompanies this dictatorial speech with several grave little nods and a charming smile.

Nobody ever contradicts Dolores. So Mr. Vernon pats the small white hand lying near his own on the table-cloth—which looks quite dingy beside it—and says no more.

'I shall sit up to-night,' says Harley suddenly, with an air of determination. 'I like sitting up; and I have quite set my heart on finding this ghost.'

Here he returns Dolores' former glance with interest; but that young lady by neither word nor glance shows signs of comprehension. She gazes back at him innocently without so much as a quiver in her long lashes, and tells him he is very brave, and asks him politely—very politely—to try another peach—they are *so* good.

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The midnight hour has chimed long since. All the house is still. Through the mullioned window at the end of the long picture-gallery great waves of moonlight are pouring, turning all they touch into palest silver, lighting up the grim warriors, and bathing in their cool rays the simpering dames that line the walls.

How beautiful on yonder casement-panes
The mild moon gazes ! Mark
With what a lovely and majestic step
She treads the heavenly hills !
And, oh, how soft, how silently she pours
Her chastened radiance on the scene below ;
And hill and dale and tower
Drink the pure flood of light !
Roll on, roll thus, queen of the midnight hour,
For ever beautiful !

The light is so intense that one might almost think it day, but for the unbroken stillness, and the impenetrable shroud—chill and silent—that, hanging over all, betrays the presence of night.

Not the faintest noise, not even the nimble scampering of some terrified mouse, comes to break the monotonous quiet that reigns everywhere, except the sound of Mr. Harley's feet as he marches disconsolately up and down the east corridor.

It is now a quarter-past one, and as yet no ghost has put in an appearance.

It is really too bad ! Perhaps, when undertaking his present task, Mr. Harley devoutly hoped no unearthly visitor would present himself or herself to him ; but, now that the watch is nearly over, and nothing has come of it, he feels aggrieved, and as though he had been done out of something.

His thoughts, as he paces to and fro in the lonely hours, with nothing stirring save himself and the imperturbable clocks, are not very cheerful. He loves, but the desire of his heart is unattainable. Of course he is not the only man whose hopes have been nipped in the bud—who has found himself wrecked when in sight of port ; but this thought, though carefully brought to the front, fails to give consolation.

He goes over the conversation of the morning again and again, omitting not the slightest word or look, and he inwardly breathes an uncomplimentary word or two upon Felicia. Then he rouses himself with a start, and, glancing at his

watch, sees it is nearly two, and decides on going to bed. Pshaw, he might have known it was all mere foolish superstition on the part of a few uneducated women! Servants, as a rule, delight in the supernatural. The idea of any sane person in the nineteenth century thinking he could see a disembodied spirit! Ah! What is that?

At this point there is a break in Mr. Harley's thoughts; his whole mind flies into his eyes. At first his attention was attracted by a faint rustle; then came an indistinct patter as of high-heeled shoes; and now—*now* a vague shadowy form emerges from the west corridor—the one parallel to his—and crosses the picture-gallery right within his view. As it advances slowly and without suspicion of haste into the full light of the brilliant moonbeams, which seemed to wrap it in a pale splendour, it seems to the breathless spectator to be indeed of unusual height. It wears a gown, long and of a marvellous purity; one hand is slightly extended, and its face is turned aside, as with measured steps it reaches and begins to ascend the stone staircase that leads to the turret chamber—Dolores' painting-room!

Mr. Harley cannot say that he feels no fear. His heart beats violently, and his breath comes unpleasantly fast. After an instant's hesitation, however, he recovers himself, and quickly but noiselessly follows the ghostly figure—now almost out of sight—and, as he gains the top of the stairs, is just in time to see the tail of the snowy gown disappear into the painting-room.

At this moment it occurs to him that ladies long buried with severed throats are not nice to look upon; but he remembers some one who said she would do almost anything for him who should come face to face with this ghost, and he goes forward bravely.

Within the turret chamber also, Diana is holding full sway. The whole room is flooded with moonlight, the minutest article may be seen; but the only object Harley sees is the ghost herself, standing by the open easel.

It is Dolores! A very lovely Dolores, but a Dolores lost in slumber! The violet eyes are wide open, but they are sightless, and she evidently sees only with her 'mind's eye.' She is gazing with rapt and pleased attention at the canvas before her, a picture half completed, while one hand wanders restlessly, aimlessly, amongst the brushes and paints near her.

Harley is spell-bound and a good deal puzzled. He hardly

knows what to do. He is afraid to leave her—he is afraid to wake her. His doubts at this juncture are happily set at rest for ever. A delicious but impatient breeze, born of the summer night, comes with a rush through an open window, and the door, half closed already, shuts with a loud bang.

Mr. Harley unconsciously retires into the shadow, and Miss Vernon, with a deep sigh and the lazy gesture of an awakening child, stretches out her white arms—which, under the loose sleeves of her dressing-gown, gleam like rounded marble—and wakes!

At first she looks around her, as though still half unconscious; but, as remembrance returns, and she finds herself standing in a patch of moonlight, when she had believed herself safe between two fair lavender-scented sheets, she grows frightened, and with a gesture full of horror puts both her hands up to her head.

‘Ah, what is it? Where am I?’ she cries, in a terrified tone that strikes her hearer with dismay.

He abandons the shadow, and, coming forward anxiously, takes down one of her trembling hands and holds it within his own reassuringly.

‘Dolores, don’t be frightened,’ he says hurriedly. ‘It is nothing. You were dreaming of your picture, and you walked up here, and I followed you, and—and that is all.’

‘Oh, it is a great deal!’ cries poor Dolores, clinging to him. ‘It is like a fearful nightmare. And’—distrustfully—‘how do you know I had a dream? I remember nothing of it. And did I really walk up here all by myself, or’—with a faint nervous laugh and a shuddering glance behind her—‘did the ghost bring me?’

‘My dear child,’ says Harley, unable to repress a smile, ‘do not be angry with me for saying so, but I am afraid you yourself must be regarded as the—impostor!’

‘As what?’

‘This appalling ghost that has frightened away all your best servants,’ answers Harley.

‘Do you really think so?’ says Dolores, with some disgust. ‘Have I been walking in my sleep for the past fortnight? Oh, it is too absurd! And I shall be horribly laughed at! You must promise not to tell anyone of it except papa and mamma. They won’t dare to laugh at me.’

‘I will make you any promise you like.’

‘And so,’ says Dolores, growing amused now that her fear

is at an end, 'you have actually succeeded in bringing to light this evil spirit? And it is your first attempt, too! I really think you deserve the Victoria Cross, or a gold medal, or something.'

'I certainly think I do deserve something,' says Frank meaningly.

'And doubtless you will get it. But, even if you don't, remember, "Virtue is its own reward."'

'A very poor reward,' returns Harley; then, with great earnestness—'Dolores, shall we never be friends again?'

'Well, I don't believe we ever shall,' says Dolores.

Even Miss Vernon must think this a very unkind speech, because she moves back a step or two impatiently, and, in so doing, touches a small table near her, causing some books upon it to fall heavily to the ground. Harley, to cover his chagrin, stoops to pick them up.

'Be careful of them,' says Dolores, with a cruelty that makes her hate herself, although she cannot resist the desire to say it—'be careful; they belong to Felicia!'

A photograph has fallen from one of the books, face uppermost, upon the floor. Harley, lifting it, regards it carelessly, and says in an indifferent tone, that she may see he is not utterly crushed by her incivility—

'I know this face. I have seen him often in town—with your cousin.'

The photograph represents a young man dressed in Hussar uniform.

'Yes; I suppose he is a friend of Felicia's. I found the picture in that book when she left us. His name is written by her at the back of it.'

'Ah, so it is! "Hanley" is it?'—uncertainly. 'Why, it might be "Harley," or "Hanley," or anything!' Then suddenly he lifts his head, his colour deepens, and a quick light as of inspiration comes into his dark eyes. 'There has been a mistake,' he says rapidly. 'I see it all now. It was not my name your cousin mentioned in her letter; it was Hanley's. He was quite devoted to her all last season—her very "shadow," as she herself says. Can't you understand?'

'Let me look,' says Dolores cautiously, though indeed conviction has seized upon her also; and then in turn she scrutinises the name Felicia has scribbled in her rambling writing. And in truth it might be 'Harley,' or 'Hanley'; it would be difficult to decide which.

‘How you have wronged me!’ says the young man, a world of reproach in his tone. ‘Now confess that I am in the right.’

‘Yes, I suppose so; and I am quite wrong,’ answers Miss Vernon coldly, who hardly enjoys her defeat.

‘Dolores, surely now you owe me some reparation,’ urges he eagerly. ‘Consider all I have suffered! Think how unhappy I have been!’

‘Dear me, how late it is!’ says Dolores promptly. ‘I shall be quite knocked up to-morrow. You forget how delicate I still am. Mamma would be so angry if she thought I was awake at this hour.’

She has reached the door, and has opened it by this time.

‘But, Dolores,’ cries Frank, following.

‘Hush!’ says that young lady mysteriously, placing her finger upon her lip. ‘Not a word, not a syllable, for your life! The slightest whisper might be overheard, and then they would say there were two ghosts instead of one.’

Downstairs she goes on tiptoe. But during the descent she has had time for reflection; for, as she reaches her chamber door, she pauses, and with a perfect change of manner and an adorable smile, holds out her hand to him.

‘Good-night,’ she says.

‘Under existing circumstances it is a mockery to wish me that,’ rejoins Harley, retaining her hand. ‘How can I find rest when you are estranged from me? Say one kind word before you go.’

‘What would you have me say?’ this little coquette asks, with a protesting air, though she suffers him to keep her hand prisoner.

‘That you will try to love me and that you will marry me.’

‘That would be two kind words.’

‘Well, say them. Have you forgotten? At dinner you said you would do anything for me if I succeeded in my quest.’

‘My dear Frank, consider! Would you marry a ghost? Are you not afraid that some day I shall vanish out of your sight?’

‘I am afraid of nothing but your indifference.’

‘What a romantic situation!’ says Dolores, laughing softly. ‘Unlimited moonlight, a proposal, a stalwart knight, a fair but harassed maiden! I don’t believe you see a bit of it.’

‘I can see only one thing when I am looking at you.

‘What a charming speech—and I adore pretty speeches when addressed to myself! Well, yes, then, since you will have it so. I will marry you—some day. And now, as a talisman against evil dreams, I will give you just one little kiss to carry away with you.’

So saying, she lays her hands lightly upon his shoulders, and turns a very pink cheek to him—after which, almost before he has time to assure himself of his good fortune, she slips from his embrace; and her unfriendly chamber door, closing suddenly, hides her from his longing eyes.

THE PITY OF IT.

‘Death came with friendly care.’—COLERIDGE.

‘How d’ye do, Mrs. Annesley?’ said young Thornton, raising his hat, and blushing scarlet, as Mrs. Annesley pulled up her horse just opposite to a fruiterer’s establishment to give her hand graciously enough to the lad.

‘Where have you been?’ he went on presently, his eyes travelling over her well-spattered habit and the muddy legs both of her horse and of that on which Melton was mounted. ‘Riding hard, eh?’

‘Been to see the Kildares throw off,’ Mrs. Annesley told him, in her pretty low discontented voice—‘at least we set out with that intention; but, having seen them do it, we forgot our original design of riding leisurely back again, and found ourselves in the thick of the fray before we knew what we were about. Am I very disreputable?’—glancing down listlessly at her much-soiled cloth. ‘It was such a pleasure to get away from this dreadfully dirty, disagreeable Dublin, even for a few hours, and to enjoy in its place a little of the sweet country air. You cannot fancy how it has pleased and freshened me; and I have to thank Captain Melton for it all.’

‘Glad to have been of the slightest service to you,’ murmured the Captain politely.

‘Good sport?’ questioned Thornton.

‘So, so,’ returned Melton, relapsing into his usual taciturnity.

‘How I wish I had known you were going with the Kildares!’ young Thornton exclaimed regretfully. ‘I met you, yesterday, you know, and you never mentioned it.’

‘It didn’t occur to me. Besides you once told me you never hunted with any but the Wards.’

‘Well, yes; but of course, had I only known where you

were going to-day, I would have cut everything to join you—if you would have taken me.'

'How touching!' murmured Mrs. Annesley, with a little mocking laugh. 'How infinitely tender! How inexpressibly affecting are your reproaches when uttered in that tearful tone! How old are you, Charlie?'

'Not very old—barely middle-aged; but it doesn't matter about a fellow's age in these days, does it?' said Charlie, who was a cornet in the Dragoons, and, having a bewitching little moustache, was naturally desperately ashamed of his nineteen years.

'Just what I think,' Mrs. Annesley went on cruelly, 'and therefore of course you'll tell me. How old are you?'

'Twenty-one,' answered Thornton, and blushed a bright red, both at the lie and the consciousness that even twenty-one was disgracefully behind the mark.

'Or seventeen—which?' said Mrs. Annesley, and yawned faintly behind her gauntleted glove; then, half turning her horse's head, 'better come and dine with me this evening, if you have nothing else to do,' she said, as she moved on her homeward journey.

'Thank you; I shall be only too glad,' young Thornton answered, with a pleased smile, and went on his way rejoicing.

For some little time Melton and Mrs. Annesley went silently onwards, each apparently occupied with his or her own reflections. Melton, whose simple habit it was to spend his days in alternately falling asleep and suddenly waking up again, was probably dreaming peacefully as he rode along, totally oblivious of all surrounding objects; but with his companion the case was widely different. Her thoughts were fixed on sunny days long past—on sweet regretful memories—on passionate heartfelt yearnings for the hopeless 'might have been.' All the morning, and during the entire ride, she had been nervously seeking words to ask a certain question that meant so much to her; but not until the entrance gates were reached did she manage to frame her sentence to her own satisfaction.

'I have rather lost sight of the old set for some time,' she said—'that is, of the half of you that went to India. But yesterday I fancied I saw old King Disney at a distance; and he revived within me the remembrance of ancient days. Was it fancy, I wonder, or the veritable man himself?'

'The man himself, I dare say. The lot of them arrived

from India last week, or fortnight, I forget which ; but I never thought of mentioning the fact to you, as I felt certain you must have heard all about it from some one else.'

'No ; you are my first informant. I shall be very glad to see some of them again. They have all come safely home to us, I hope ? Did you'—with the faintest hesitation in her tone—'that is—have you seen Douglas Brooke—my cousin, you know—has he returned ?'

'Yes—saw him day before yesterday,' said the Captain sleepily ; 'and uncommonly well he was looking too. Never quite believe myself all those stories about India and a fellow's liver, you know. Seems to agree pretty comfortably with most of 'em, anyhow.'

'Yes, just so,' Mrs. Annesley replied, with a little absent shake of the head ; and she held her peace after that until, the hall door being reached, Melton took her down from her saddle, and she turned to enter the house.

'You know your own room,' she said then, looking back at him with her careless, sweet smile ; 'but, as dinner won't be for an hour yet, perhaps you will wish a cigar in the shrubberies before dressing. You have plenty of time for it.' And, having listened to his—for him—lively acquiescence in this plan, she swept upstairs to her own charming sanctum.

A most pleasant room it was, perfect in all its details, and had evidently been furnished by some one who loved well the intended occupant ; but to Mrs. Annesley just then its various beauties passed unheeded. She threw off her riding-hat and pressed her hands tightly against the sides of her head.

'A whole fortnight in Dublin,' she murmured despairingly—'a whole long fortnight—and never once has he come to see me !'

.

The year Blink Bonny—shadiest of outsiders—won the Derby, saw the finish of Talbot Scrope. Upon the favourite, with almost positive certainty of success, he staked his all, the wreck of a once handsome fortune, with considerably more besides, and, as the Fates would have it—lost.

His wife—happily dead before the arrival of this last and final crash—had left him an only daughter, a fair-haired, soft-eyed girl, whose childhood had been passed in neglectful loneliness, and her girlhood amidst scenes of racing, betting, and evening entertainments, where cards and dice were the

principal features of the programme. One friend indeed she had, a friend who fast developed into a lover, and waited anxiously for the moment when he should be endowed with those good things the gods are supposed to provide, to rescue the woman he loved from the every-day injurious associations that surrounded her.

Douglas Brooke was a distant cousin of Madeleine Scrope, so distant that it had taken many hours of the lovers' time to discover the exact relationship that existed between them—such happy golden hours as come but once in any lifetime, when heads draw close together, and lips frame tender words, and eyes look love to eyes that speak again.

Douglas was but a lieutenant in a Line regiment, with nothing beside his pay except a small income of something between one and two hundred a year, inherited from some uncle of bygone memory, while Madeleine could lay claim to nothing beyond her beautiful face and graceful gentle manners; but, to these two, the life they led was one all strewn with roses, before which they could see no rocks to climb or stormy winds to weather. Douglas would soon attain his captaincy, and then they would have reached their pinnacle of bliss; but meantime they enjoyed to the full their glad to-day, and dreamed sweet dreams of their future.

After a while Douglas was ordered off to India, and then Blink Bonny won the Derby, and Talbot Scrope awoke to the fact that he was a ruined penniless man, and that his daughter had one of the fairest faces to be found in the land of green.

After that, slight notice was taken of Douglas's name or welfare. His letters were pooh-poohed as stupid, his hopes in life stigmatised as vague and uncertain to an alarming degree; while Madeleine was told to think no more of her soldier-lover. But the girl was firm. No words or cutting sneers could make her look coldly upon young Brooke's suit. She declined altogether to see or hear that he had a fault; and, though she made no further mention in public of his dearly-prized despatches, all the more for that she treasured them in secret, sleeping on them, and at times blotting them with tears half sweet, half bitter.

Geoffrey Annesley of Annesley Park, near Dublin, was rich, well-born, and something over forty years of age. He had never married—whether from want of inclination or for other reasons was not known—but it so happened that, about a year after Douglas Brooke's departure for India, he saw Miss

Scrope upon the grand stand at Punchestown, and, seeing, loved her with an earnestness that almost alarmed himself.

To get acquainted with her father was a matter of little difficulty, Talbot Scrope's civilities being open to all moneyed associates; and with Madeleine, Annesley soon made friends. He was a handsome man, with pleasant courteous manners, and, loving the girl as he did, he found it easy to make himself agreeable to her in many ways.

Talbot Scrope, seeing presently how the land lay, encouraged his hopes by every means in his power, while Madeleine herself, albeit unconsciously, still further fostered them by the childish confidence she displayed towards him, never perceiving the drift of all his attentions, until one day he roused her to a full sense of the truth by begging her eagerly, hopefully, to be his wife.

She was shocked, astonished beyond all words, and grieved besides that one so kind to her should by her act be made unhappy. Douglas was still enthroned above all compeers in her breast; and nothing was left her but to dismiss with a sad but very decided negative her middle-aged lover. To Annesley this was of course a severe blow, many things having led him to hope for a different answer to his proposal; but, being a man whom nothing daunted, and being utterly unaware of a rival in the background, he begged at Madeleine's hands a kind forgetfulness of his unlucky venture, and prepared silently to wait and watch for any symptoms that might lead him to believe in a change of sentiment on her part.

Meantime he took the father into his confidence, and astounded that worthy parent with the intelligence of how Madeleine had actually refused him and his seven thousand a year. Such conduct in Talbot Scrope's eyes was simply unparalleled in all the time-honoured legends of ungrateful and undutiful children. He spoke to Madeleine, raved at her, tried with continued eloquence to alter her decision, but without avail; after which he bethought himself that, all being fair in war as in love, he would resort to foul means to gain his ends, the gentler sort having failed to awaken his daughter to any sense of propriety.

The Indian mail arrived shortly afterwards; but this time it brought no tidings of her distant lover to the expectant Madeleine. At first she would give no heed to the heart sinkings that followed on this unusual silence; but, when again

the foreign post came in and still brought no Indian letter, her spirits failed, and terrible forebodings crossed her mind. Ah, could it indeed be true, what her father had been hinting about so much of late, that Douglas had grown careless and forgetful of her in his far-off land, that he was eager for an opportunity to break an engagement that must perforce be one of long standing? She would wait and watch and pray. She would not believe her cousin faithless; but, when again and again the passionately longed-for day came round, and still brought her no word of her first love, she lost all heart, and the end of the year saw her the listless broken bride of Geoffrey Annesley. Not until she had disclosed to him all the secret of her first unhappy attachment did she consent to be his wife; but he, trusting to time and the strength of his own affection to alter her feelings towards him in the future, gladly accepted her, in spite of her never-to-be-forgotten past.

Nevertheless, when years had gone over their heads, and he found his young wife, though ever sweet and dutiful in her demeanour towards him, in no wise nearer to him in heart than she had been on their fair bridal morning, there were moments when Geoffrey Annesley would have freely bartered his possessions could he have gained, even for one hour, what was to him beyond all price—the love of his beautiful wife.

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‘Captain Brooke,’ announces the servant. And Mrs. Annesley, rising, finds herself face to face once more with Douglas Brooke.

He is greatly changed. This she sees in the first swift glance, although she is trembling from head to foot, and knows an additional pallor has fallen across her usually colourless features. By a violent effort, however, she restrains her emotion, and, moving forward, holds out her hand.

‘Is it you, Douglas?’ she says, endeavouring to speak with the quiet warmth the occasion demands, and failing miserably, while placing a hand that has suddenly grown cold as ice within his. ‘I am so glad to see you. I had a few fears about your coming at all; but I now see they were unfounded.’ This is a most unfortunate remark, and the moment it is past her lips she would gladly give worlds to recall it.

‘Why should you doubt my coming?’ he asks, in a hard methodical way.

Since his entrance he has never once removed his eyes from her face, and this continued scrutiny greatly adds to the nervousness that is gradually overpowering her.

‘Principally because Captain Melton told me you were in town quite three weeks ago—and that seems a long time to let pass without coming to see an old friend, does it not?’

‘Very. How altered you are, Madeleine!’

‘Am I? I suppose so. I feel tolerably venerable at times. Don’t sit there, Douglas; you will find this chair so much more cosy. They make such ridiculous furniture nowadays that one is almost afraid to use it. Well, and so you think me altered?’

‘Yes; you are hardly the Madeleine I remember. But of course that should not surprise me. You have changed from a pretty girl into a still more beautiful woman.’

‘You must not flatter me,’ she says, with a little nervous laugh. ‘And, if you think me looking well now, when I have such a horrible headache, and am at my worst, what would you think if you saw me in all my glory? By-the-by, Douglas, do you know many people in Dublin now? Would you care for any invitations? There will be the Guards’ ball on the nineteenth.’

She feels painfully that she is talking against time; she dreads with ever-increasing horror a break in the conversation. Oh, if Geoffrey’s figure would but appear in the doorway! Never before in all her married life has she wished so earnestly for her husband’s presence as at this moment, when she finds herself alone with that husband’s rival.

‘How long is it since we parted?’ asks Brooke, utterly ignoring, if indeed he has heard, her last words.

‘How long? Years and years, I think. It seems to me such ages ago that I almost forget.’

‘Do you?’—bitterly, getting up and going over to the hearth-rug, where he stands leaning against the chimney-piece, and looking down upon her sitting beneath. ‘What memories you women have! But it did not take you years to forget, Madeleine, did it? Months sufficed.’

‘I do not understand,’ says Mrs. Annesley, colouring faintly, and bringing her teeth down sharply upon her under lip.

‘Of course not. I did not expect you would. It is such an absurd thing for a fellow in these days to feel cut up because a woman throws him over, to believe himself hardly

used because a few silly love-letters have been left unanswered.'

'Letters! What letters?'—with suppressed agitation. 'Any I ever received from you I answered.'

'I don't want any excuses,' he interrupts hastily; 'and I have no wish whatever to—to see you false to your conscience on my account. I came here to-day more from courtesy perhaps than anything else; and, now that I am here'—with an expressive glance round the exquisitely-furnished apartment—'I can hardly wonder at your preferring your present life to one with nothing to recommend it, save such an utterly useless and worn-out attribute as love. But I beg your pardon; I bore you—no more shall be said about it.'

'But more shall be said!' exclaims Madeleine, rising with flashing eyes. 'As you have chosen to introduce the subject of the past, I will discuss it now with you for the first and last time. You speak of letters, and I tell you again, all I ever had from you I answered! A year after you left me you ceased to write. In vain I waited and on my knees prayed for even one line to reassure me of your faith—it never came. You hint at my falseness! Who was false but you? You had forgotten me! I was alone in the world! You know my father was worse than useless; and then came my husband, offering me a warm heart and a home that at least would be free from the horrors that every day surrounded me. Believing in your treachery—'

'Madeleine!'

'Hush—let me continue! Believing in your treachery, finding myself deserted and forgotten, with nothing remaining to me of my most cherished hopes but bitter memories, what was left to me but to accept the truest, kindest love that ever yet was given? You accuse me of forgetfulness; now I tell you the truth! It is the truth what I say; you must know that!'

Brooke is white as death. He is evidently using terrible self-control.

'So he was bent on separating us?' he says presently in a deadly calm voice. 'It was a very successful plot! And the letters—what of them? They were suppressed?'

'How can I tell? I know nothing of them! You have raised a horrible doubt in my mind! Oh, Douglas, spare the dead!'

'I wrote four in all,' he says slowly, 'without getting any

reply. Of course there was but one thing left for me to think. Madeleine——'

'Do not say another word!' she entreats eagerly. 'I will not hear it!'

'Only one! You must answer me this! If—if no foul play had divided us, would you have been true to me?'

'I would,' she answers faintly, and then sinks back into her chair, and lets her face fall forward into her hands.

Presently some one's fingers close round hers; and, looking up, she becomes aware that Brooke is on his knees beside her.

'Madeleine, hear me!' he says in a voice changed and hoarse with passion. 'Call me mad, wicked, worse than foolish—what you will; now that I have seen you again I feel I must speak! As a girl I loved you; as a woman I know I love you ten times more! You are all the world to me—my very life! To gain you I would fling aside ambition, liberty, all that makes life most sweet—nay, even honour itself!'

She tries to speak, but cannot. She can only turn upon him wide beseeching eyes. But it is too late; as he has begun, so he must finish.

'What is this life you are leading?' he goes on vehemently. 'Is it a happy one? Oh, darling, with all its great beauty, your face lacks content; and in your eyes lies an expression that never rested there in our fond, tender past! Is an enforced and loveless tie to be considered binding? Is a bond that springs from basest treachery to be for ever sacred?'

She pushes him from her then, and, rising, shrinks away from his very touch.

'What are you going to say?' she whispers in a horror-stricken tone.

'You know what I am going to say! Oh, my love, surely happiness is not impossible to us yet? Madeleine, I swear I would not so speak to you if, coming here to-day, I found you light-hearted—nay, even tolerably contented in your home! But that is not the case. I know you love me still—and what torment is equal to that of being separated from those we love?' She shakes her head in dissent. 'You deny it? Come, let your lips frame the falsehood if they can! Say you do not love me!'

'I do not!' She forces her pale trembling lips to utter the words.

'Is that the truth?' he cries. 'Madeleine, your face, your very agitation, belie you! Your heart is as much mine as on the day we parted! I implore you not to decide too hastily. I am wealthy now. Yes, when it was too late I found myself a rich man; when all I held most dear on earth was beyond my reach, I gained the money I had so longed for—only to curse it for its tardy coming. In a foreign land we might yet be happy! Why must you consider yourself forever bound to a man who bought you with his gold?'

'And you would buy me with yours! Hush!' she cries passionately—'not a word against the truest, kindest friend a woman ever had! I have listened to you too long already! Your words, your very presence here is an insult to him! Oh, Douglas—holding out her clasped hands in pitiable entreaty—'if you still retain even a shadow of the old love for me, have pity upon me, and go!'

'And have you no pity for me?' he says almost fiercely. 'Am I nothing? Does my wretched life not count? You have ruined every hope I ever formed. If you drive me from you now, Madeleine, remember, you look upon me for the last time!'

'I remember,' she murmurs faintly.

'And still you bid me go?'

'I do.'

'What a fool I am,' he cries bitterly, 'to believe any woman capable of an honest affection! My absence or presence is no more to you now than if I were the very commonest acquaintance! While I curse and cavil at the cruel fate that has separated us, you stand there cold and unfeeling!'

'No, no,' she interrupts him painfully. 'not cold, not unfeeling. You who know me cannot accuse me of that. Oh, is it because my task is hard that you must seek to make it harder?'

'Is it hard? Then you still love me, Madeleine?'

'I do,' she answers, turning full upon him her beautiful anguished eyes, 'and it is because of that love I now entreat you to leave me. Though this unhappy affection should consume me, never for a moment will I prove disloyal to the man who so trusts and believes in me. I tell you solemnly—laying her hand upon her bosom and looking upwards—'that, sooner than fly with you, and so bring disgrace upon his name, I would gladly die—ay, a thousand deaths! Therefore it is that I pray you to go, and let me find, if not happiness, at least peace.'

He is deeply touched; but, this better feeling not bringing

with it consolation, he falls upon his knees before her and hides his face with a groan.

‘Is there then no hope for me?’ he says despairingly.

‘Not in this world,’ she murmurs; ‘but there is another—hereafter we may meet again.’

‘Oh, my life, my darling,’ cries he, ‘how shall I live without you?’

A faint irrepressible sob escapes her; she turns aside, but one hand, wandering downwards, alights upon his bowed head and lingers there caressingly. Gradually it reaches his face; and, roused by the touch, he rises, still holding the white cold hand pressed closely to his lips.

‘Before I go, Madeleine,’ he says, ‘you will not refuse me my only request? The time was when they were all mine; now I ask but for one. Will you kiss me before we part—for ever?’

She makes a motion towards him, and, for the last time on earth, is folded in her lover’s arms. A moment later he is gone; and, as the door closes behind him, Mrs. Annesley sways helplessly for a second or two, and then falls as one dead upon the ground.

When, a quarter of an hour later, Geoffrey Annesley arrives, it is to find his wife still lying there insensible. Terrified to the last degree, he raises her from the floor, and, laying her upon a sofa, applies such remedies as, after a little while, restore her to consciousness. When at length she opens her eyes, he can see within their clear depths a vague expression of fear that gradually changes to one of relief as they fall upon her husband’s face. Languidly, and with a sigh, she puts her hand to her head.

‘Where am I?’ she says, with feeble bewilderment.

‘Here, darling, and I am with you. Do you feel better now?’

‘Yes—much better. When did you come, Geoffrey?’

‘A few minutes ago, and found you lying senseless over there. You frightened me more than I can say. How was it darling? Did you feel ill?’

‘I fainted, I think,’ says Mrs. Annesley evasively, turning away her head, while a bright hectic flush comes to the surface and dyes her pale cheeks crimson.

Thereupon Geoffrey asks no further questions, albeit he is devoured with anxiety to learn the real cause of her illness, but, passing his arm around her waist, half carries, half

supports her up the stairs. Upon the landing outside the bedroom door is Mrs. Annesley's maid. Geoffrey beckons to her.

'Here, Lizette, your mistress is not quite well, see that she has everything she requires,' he says, and resigning her to the care of the vivacious but compassionate Lizette, enters his dressing-room, where he finds Dickson busy about his evening clothes. Dickson is wonderfully useful, but also effusive.

Not that coat, Dickson—get me another.'

'Yes, sir. Very cold day, sir.'

'Very.'

'Yes, sir—cold and dull, sir.'

'I did not find it particularly dull—but then I was busy.'

'Just so, sir—not in the least abashed—nothing like employment to keep one from the "blues." But here in the house, you see, sir, the mistress even complained a good deal, not being able to get out, what with the fogs and the drizzle. These boots, sir?'

'Yes. The climate is depressing. I hope she had some friends to keep her from being bored to death.'

'Yes, sir. I hear Marks saying as how the Honorable Mrs. Gower and the Miss Gowers sat a long time: and in the afternoon—or more towards evening—a strange gentleman called—a Captain Brooke—military gent he were.'

'Ah! says Geoffrey Annesley, and then, dismissing Dickson, goes into his wife's room, and, finding her lying pale and harassed upon her bed, induces her to confide to him all that has passed between her and her cousin; after which, he leaves her to gain some rest, feeling the happier for having sobbed out her sorrowful confession upon his faithful breast.

Two years have passed away—two years of easy-going, uneventful existence, that have left but few traces behind them as they went. Between Geoffrey Annesley and his wife there still endures as full and open a confidence as of old; and, though the name of Douglas Brooke is never mentioned by them, nevertheless the silence conceals no miserable secret that, coming to light, might cause them to drift asunder.

Once or twice, by purest accident, the two men met, but, each knowing who the other was, a formal introduction between them was studiously avoided. Not once again during

the short stay he made in his native land did Douglas Brooke give himself the chance of looking upon Madeleine Annesley's beautiful face. As soon as his affairs were settled, he went to England, and—the one glimpse he had again obtained of his lost love having fatally increased the lasting passion he entertained for her—he shortly afterwards exchanged into another regiment, and was almost immediately ordered upon foreign service.

He has been gone something over fourteen months, when Geoffrey Annesley strolls leisurely into his breakfast-room one morning in July. It is gorgeous, glowing July, so warm that a hushed and drowsy feeling pervades the very air, while a certain vague tendency towards sleepy idleness runs languidly through people's veins. Yet, and in spite of all this, must the *Times* be read. To-day it seems almost a labour to run one's eyes through its closely-printed columns, and Annesley suppresses a yawn as he shakes it from its folds.

But presently, uttering a sharp ejaculation, he nearly drops the paper. His brow grows damp, a powerful agitation seizes hold of him. There before him in black and white stand out with terrible plainness the tidings of Douglas Brooke's barbarous death.

'Killed in a skirmish with the Maories—brutally murdered.'

The words swim before his eyes. In a moment he sees with strange vividness the slight tall handsome figure, the blue eyes, the chestnut hair of his rival, the living form of the man who had come between him and his heart's love. How horrible it all seems—how impossible to picture him lying dead and cold in a foreign land, far from all who loved him, never again to look upon the green shores and purple hills of old Ireland!

And then arises the thought of his wife. Who is to tell her of her cousin's death? Must the task devolve upon him? Geoffrey shrinks from the idea of inflicting this blow as one would shrink from some mortal wound. He has ever made it a point to refrain from all mention of Brooke's name in his wife's hearing, and now must he begin with only the miserable story of his death? Then succeeds a wild hope, a sudden gleam of passionate unholy joy that almost overcomes the man who stands there with the fatal tidings still fresh in his hand. Now that Brooke is dead, now that he has passed away for ever—this fair-haired rival of his—into the land of shadows, may it not be that his memory too will fade from Madeleine's mind, leaving her free to come to him—Geoffrey, her husband

—at last? Surely in her sorrow and grief it is to him she will turn for consolation, and, receiving it, may learn to bestow upon him in the end that priceless treasure of her love that for so long has been another's? Poor darling, poor little soul, how will she bear the news? Faint perhaps, or cry, or——

The door opens and Madeleine enters. She is dressed in softest, whitest cambric, long and trailing, with just the faintest fleck of colour at her throat and in her hair.

'What a delicious morning!' she says, going over to the window and throwing it open, so that the fresh pure perfume of the slumbering flowers creeps up and lingers round her from the grass parterre below, where they lie, scarce caring to raise their drooping heads beneath the rays of the oppressive sun. 'I do believe this is the prettiest place in the world in summer; I shall be almost sorry to leave it to go abroad next month. What shall we do with ourselves to-day, Geoffrey?'

'Anything you wish, my darling.'

'Then I shall wish to drive all the way to Kingstown, to take a boat there, and spend every bit of this livelong summer day upon the water.'

'So you shall,' says Mr. Annesley.

But the words almost choke him as he remembers what he has to tell her on this happy summer morning which she seems so bent on appreciating to its fullest. Never has she appeared to him so sweet, so gay, so contented with her life, as now, when he feels a few short words will blot out all the tender brightness of her face. And he alone must be the one to speak them; his hand must be the one to strike the blow.

His wife, turning away to an easy chair, throws herself lazily into it. Geoffrey, with the paper still in his hand, moves so that his back is towards her, and then essays to speak. He cannot look at her while executing his painful duty—he dares not watch the changes on her expressive face. So, with a sickening terror at his heart, he goes over to the window where she so lately has been standing.

'Madeleine,' he says.

'Well, dear?'

'I have something to tell you.'

'If it is anything disagreeable, Geoff, do not tell me until to-morrow. I want to be quite happy to-day.'

Mr. Annesley almost groans aloud.

‘But it must be told!’ he says desperately. ‘You know your cousin’s regiment was ordered last year to New Zealand; and I see, by this morning’s paper, that—they have had a slight brush with the Maories—and—and Douglas—your cousin—has been—is wounded.’

There is an instant’s pause.

‘Is he dead?’ said Madeleine in a voice that is utterly dispassionate.

‘Yes,’ replies Geoffrey in a whisper, after which ensues a long silence.

It is over. The dreaded words have gone forth, and he is thankful to believe she has borne them better than could ever have been expected—has neither screamed, nor cried aloud, nor exhibited deep feeling of any kind. Annesley—strong man as he is—is trembling from head to foot. He stands gazing out over the clean-mown lawn, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, only conscious that there is a great expanse of pale azure covering the heavens, all down to where in the far distance the blue sky kisses the earth.

He cannot bring himself to meet his wife’s eyes just at first; but presently, having recovered himself a little, he says in a low tone—

‘It seems very sad, does it not?’

There is no reply. A sudden horrible fear seizes him, and, turning, he gazes at her with bated breath.

She is lying back in her chair, a calm utterly sweet expression upon her still white face. One hand lies listlessly upon her lap, the other hangs over the side of the chair. But, oh, what is that disfiguring the purity of her dress—that thin crimson stream which, commencing at and dyeing her sweet lips, creeps downwards even to the fingers of the hand resting so helplessly upon her knee? Surely not blood!

It has all happened in a moment. The pain and grief and sorrow of years is at an end at last; the poor tired heart has found its rest.

HOW SNOOKS GOT OUT OF IT.

‘This bold, bad man!’—*Henry VIII.*

‘IF you will take my advice,’ said Mr. Wilding, making a last noble but futile effort to balance the ivory paper-knife on the tip of his first finger, ‘you won’t go to the Brownrigs’ ball.’

‘And why not?’ asked his companion irritably.

‘Well, I really wouldn’t, you know,’ said Mr. Wilding, giving up his struggle with the impossible, and laying the refractory paper-knife upon the table, ‘for a variety of reasons. Girls play the very mischief with you, and you know what trouble it gave me to get you out of your last scrape. There are four Brownrig girls, aren’t there? And they are all pretty.’

‘I don’t see what that’s got to do with it,’ said Snooks sulkily. ‘There’s safety in a multitude; I can’t marry ‘em all, can I?’

‘Happily, no! Though, if the laws of your land did not forbid it, I am inclined to think you might try to accomplish even that. Still, be advised, Snooks, and be conspicuous by your absence at the Brownrigs’ “small and early.” Papa Brownrig when incensed is not nice, and you know you are decidedly *épris* with Miss Katie.’

‘No, I am not,’ said Snooks, with decision, ‘not a bit of it. Though I allow she is a handsome girl, and has lovely eyes; hasn’t she, now?’

‘I don’t know. As a rule I never look into a woman’s eyes. I consider it a rudeness, as well as a *bêtise*,’ said Wilding earnestly, telling his lie without a blush. ‘Never mind her eyes. If’—warningly—‘you *must* go to this ball, at least try to forget that she has any eyes at all. If you don’t, you will propose to her, to a moral.’

‘One would think I was a raw schoolboy,’ said young

Snooks wrathfully. 'Do you think I can't look at a woman without committing myself? Do I look like a fool?'

Whatever Mr. Wilding thought at that moment, he kept it to himself. Before he spoke next, he and his conscience had agreed to dissemble.

'My dear fellow, do not let us even hint at such a thing,' he said amiably. 'I only meant you were slightly—very slightly—susceptible, and that Miss Katie has a certain amount of pleasing power, and that—I positively *would* give up this ball if I——'

'Are *you* going?' broke in Snooks impatiently.

'Well, yes, I dare say I shall look in about twelve.'

'Then *I* shall look in with you,' said Snooks defiantly.

'Fact is, the fellow wants to spoon her himself, and I don't see the force of being cut out,' said he to himself complacently, as he ran down the steps of Wilding's stairs.

. . .

Beyond all question the Brownrigs' ball was a decided success. The rooms were filled to overflowing, the staircases were choked, the heat was intolerable. Sir Thomas and Lady Higgins had actually put in an appearance after all, and the supper, if uneatable, was, I assure you, very expensive. No pains or money had been spared; everything was what the mistress of the house called '*ong régäl*;' and all the Miss Brownrigs looked as charming as anyone could desire.

There were four of them. There was Katie, the second daughter—Snooks's friend, and the possessor of the lovely eyes. And they *were* lovely: large, 'and dark, and true, and tender,' like the North, according to the Laureate; 'black as sloes,' said her fond if slightly oppressive mother, and of the languid melting order.

Then there was Hetty, the eldest girl, who, if her eyes were not dark as midnight, had at least the dearest little nose in the world. A pure Greek feature, perfect in every respect, ignorant of colds in the head, that made one long to tell her (only she would have blushed—they were all nicely brought up) about Dudu and her Phidian appendage.

Then came Georgie—'George the Third,' as she was playfully termed in the bosom of her family—who, if she had neither nose nor eyes like her sisters, had certainly a prettier mouth than either. A sweet little kissable rosebud of a mouth, that pouted and laughed alternately, and did considerable execution.

And finally there was Lily. A tall pale girl, with blue eyes, a finely-cut chin, and a good deal of determination all round.

Katie's eyes were larger, darker, and (when she looked at Snooks and thought of his thousands) more melting than ever that night. Her dress, if slightly *bizarre*, was intensely becoming. Snooks, for the first half-hour, kept himself bravely aloof from her fascinations, declined to notice her reproachful glances and languishing *œillades*, and for reward was wretched. Finally, being driven into a corner during a fatal set of Lancers, he met her eyes, saw, and was conquered. She would dance the next with him? Yes (coldly). And the next? Yes (more gently). And the ninth?—he can see she is disengaged for it? Yes (this time quite warmly).

An hour later the deed was done. Some capital champagne, a dark avenue (I believe there were some Chinese lanterns there originally, but a kind wind had blown them out), and a soft little hand slipped into his, did the work; and Miss Katie had promised bashfully, but with unmistakable willingness, to be the future Mrs. Snooks. Whether it was Snooks or the property pertaining to Snooks she most affected, deponent sayeth not.

When, however, her betrothed found what he had done, and remembered his former words, and all the awfulness of parental wrath, his heart failed him. He went, as he usually did when in sorry case, in search of Wilding; and, having discovered him, took him into a side room, and shutting the door confronted him with a rather pale face.

'So the eyes were too many for you,' said Mr. Wilding calmly, after a deliberate examination of the disturbed face before him. 'I told you how it would be.'

'That's the sort of thing any fellow might say,' returned Snooks pathetically. 'I didn't think *you* would have been so aggravating; and just when you see I'm down on my luck too. Yes, I've been and gone and done it.'

"'Mother *will* be pleased,'" quoted his friend and law adviser with a shrug. 'So, by-the-by, will be your father. They both regard nothing so highly as birth. I suppose Miss Brownrig can lay claim to some decent breeding?'

'The old chap is a cornchandler, you know that—at least, he used to be,' said Snooks, with a heavy groan.

'Oh, indeed! And a very charming business too, I make no doubt. Leads up to quite a train of ideas. Corn, wheat,

staff of life, quaint old mill, and rustic bridge in the distance ; miller sitting on it. I wonder,' dreamily, 'if Brownrig ever wore a white hat? And if so—why? Don't all speak at once. Well, well, she is a very pretty girl. Such eyes, you know! I really congratulate you, my dear fellow.'

'Wilding,' desperately, 'can't you do something?—I—I don't know how it happened. It was the champagne, I suppose, and of course you know she is pretty; but I don't want to marry any one, and I know the governor wouldn't hear of it.'

'He will have to hear of it now, won't he?' asked Wilding unfeelingly.

'He would go out of his mind if such a thing was even hinted to him,' declared Snooks wildly. 'Try to help me out of it, Wilding, can't you?'

'I don't see what there is to do, except marry her. I only hope Lady Snooks and Miss Cornchandler will get on. And you should think of her beauty, you know; doubtless it will console you when Sir Peter cuts you off with the customary shilling.'

'I suppose I had better cut my throat and put an end to it,' said Snooks dismally, and then—overcome, no doubt, by the melancholy of this suggestion—he breaks down and gives way to tears.

'I say, don't do that, you know,' exclaimed Wilding indignantly. 'Weeping all over the place won't improve matters, and will only make you look a worse fool than Nature intended, when you go out of the room. If you *have* put your foot in it, at least try to bear misfortune like a man. Look here,' angrily. 'If you are going to keep up this hideous boo-hooing I'll leave the room, and you too, to your fate. It's downright indecent. They will hear you in the next house if you don't moderate your grief.'

As the nearest house was a quarter of a mile off, this was severe.

'I shouldn't care if they heard me in the next *town*,' said Mr. Snooks, who was quite too far gone for shame.

'There is just one chance for you, and only one,' said Wilding slowly. 'I have an idea, and you must either follow it, or—go to the altar.'

'I'll follow anything,' eagerly. 'What is it?'

'You have proposed to Miss Katie,' solemnly. 'Now go and *propose to the other three!*'

As Wilding gave vent to his idea he turned abruptly on his heel and left the room.

'I'll do it,' said Snooks valiantly, drying his eyes and giving his breast a tragic tap, 'whatever comes of it.'

Going into the hall, he saw Hetty standing near an entrance; a little way beyond her was Katie, conversing with a tall and lanky youth. Not daring to glance in the direction of the latter, who plainly expected him to come straight to her on the wings of love, he turned and asked Hetty to dance.

They danced, and then (it was a custom with the ball-goers in that mild suburban neighbourhood) he drew her out under the gleaming stars and up the dark avenue that a few minutes since was the scene of her sister's happiness.

There he proposed in due form, and was again accepted. Hetty's conduct, indeed, was perhaps a degree more pronounced than Katie's, because she laid her head upon his shoulder, and he felt he was by all the laws of sentiment bound to kiss her. Her nose looked lovely in the pale moonlight; so I dare say he did not find the fulfilling of this law difficult.

After that he had some more, a great deal more, champagne; and then he proposed to Miss Georgie, who also consented to be his. There now remained but one other step to be taken. He crossed the room, and asked the youngest Miss Brownrig to dance. He was getting rather mixed by this time, and was on the very point of asking her to marry him instead, so customary had the question grown to him now. Miss Lily, however, declined to dance, on the plea that she was tired, and could exert herself no more that night. With questionable taste he pressed the matter, and begged her to give him one, just one. At this she told him frankly she did not admire his style of dancing, which of course ended the conversation. So he asked her to come for a stroll instead; and, having arrived at the momentous spot, delivered himself of the ornate speech that had already done duty three times that night. I forget what it was, but I know it wound up with the declaration that he adored her and wanted to marry her.

'It's extremely good of you, I'm sure,' said the youngest Miss Brownrig calmly. 'But, uncivil as I fear it must sound, I don't want to marry you.'

'Don't you, by Jove!' said Snooks hastily. 'Well, that's awfully ki—— No, no!' pulling himself up with a start; 'I

don't mean that, you know : I mean it's awfully horrid, you know. In fact,' warming to his work through sheer gratitude, 'you have made me miserable for ever ; you've broken my heart.'

'Dear me, how shocking !' said Miss Lily frivolously. 'Let us hope Time will mend it. I'm not very sure you did not speak the truth at first. I really believe it *is* kind, my refusing you. And now, Mr. Snooks, if I were you I should go in and say good-night to mamma, because you have been having a good deal of papa's champagne, and it is trying to the constitution.'

Snooks took the hint, bade farewell to Mrs. Brownrig, who, to his heated imagination, appeared to regard him already with a moist and motherly eye, and, taking Wilding's arm, drew him out of the house.

'Well ?' said the latter interrogatively

'I don't know whether it is well or ill,' returned he gloomily. 'But I followed your advice, and proposed to 'em all.'

'And they accepted you ?'

'The most of 'em. But Lily, the youngest, she——'

'I always said she was a sensible girl, put in Mr. Wilding, *otto voce*.

'Did you ?' with much surprise. 'Well, she refused me ; sort of said she wouldn't have me at any price. So you see you were wrong !'

'I always knew she was one of the most intelligent girls I ever met,' Mr. Wilding repeated, in a tone so difficult that his companion for once had sufficient sense to refrain from demanding an explanation.

The next morning, as Katie Brownrig turned the angle of the hall that led to her father's sanctum (whither a sense of filial duty beckoned her) she almost ran into the arms of her three sisters, all converging to the same spot from different directions. Simultaneously they entered Mr. Brownrig's study (He called it a library ; but that word is too often profaned for me to profane it, so I shall draw the line at study.) But to return. Miss Lily, being the youngest, was of course the first to raise her voice.

'I had a proposal last night, papa, and I have come to tell you about it,' said she, in a tone replete with triumph.

It is so sweet to the mind of youth to outdo its elders.

But 'on this occasion only' the elders refused to be outdone. They each and all betrayed a smile of inward satisfaction, and then they gave way to speech.

'No!' they said, in a breath. They did not mean to doubt or be impolite; they only meant surprise.

'The curate,' said Hetty, in a composed but plainly contemptuous whisper. It was a stage-whisper.

'Old Major Sterne,' said Miss Georgie promptly.

'Perhaps Henry Simms,' suggested Katie, with some sympathy. Then turning to her father she said, with a conscious blush, 'It is very strange, papa, but I too had a proposal last night.'

'And so had I!' exclaimed Georgie and Hetty in a breath.

'Eh?' said papa, pushing up his spectacles. He was fat and pudgy, with sandy hair and a flabby nose. He was a powerful man, too, and one unpleasant to come to open quarrel with. Proposals in the Brownrig family were few and far between—in fact curiosities—and so much luck, as the girls described, falling into one day overpowered him.

'One at a time; my breath is not what it used to be,' he said, addressing Katie. (If he had said *breadth* it would have been equally true, as his mother—if she was to be believed—always declared he was a lean baby.) 'May I ask the name of your lover?'

'Mr. Snooks,' said she, with downcast eyes and a timid smile. She took up the corner of a cherry-coloured bow that adorned her gown, and fell to admiring it, through what she fondly thought was bashfulness.

'Impossible!' exclaimed Georgie angrily.

'What a disgraceful untruth!' cried Hetty rudely. 'Mr. Snooks proposed to me, to *me*, last night, and I accepted him.'

'What is it you say? Oh, I am going out of my mind; my senses are deserting me,' said Georgie, putting her hands to her head with a dramatic gesture. 'Or is it a dream that he asked *me* to marry him, and that I too said "Yes"?''

'I seldom visit the clouds,' said Lily, with a short but bitter laugh. 'And I certainly know he made *me* a noble offer of his hand and heart; both which treasures I declined.'

'Where?' demanded the other three, as though with one mouth.

'In the laurel avenue!'

At this they all groaned aloud.

'Perfidious monster!' said Hetty from her heart.

'Am I to understand,' began Mr. Brownrig, with suppressed but evident fury, 'that this—this—unmitigated scoundrel asked you *all* to marry him last night?'

'If we speak the truth, *yes*,' replied the girls dismally.

'He was drunk,' said papa savagely.

'I can't believe it,' said Katie, who was dissolved in tears—in fact, 'like Niobe, *all* tears'—by this time. 'Nothing could be nicer than the way he did it. His language was perfect, and so thoroughly from the—*heart*.'

'He addressed me in a most honourable, upright, and Christian fashion,' said Hetty. 'I am sure he meant every word he said.'

She was thinking uneasily of that kiss in the moonlight. *Could* anyone have seen her? Was old Major Sterne anywhere about at the moment?

'I certainly considered his manner strange, not a bit like what one reads,' said Georgie honestly; 'but I thought of the title and the property, and I said "Yes" directly.'

'I thought him the very greatest muff I ever spoke to,' broke in Miss Lily, with decision. 'I refused him without a moment's hesitation, and told him to go home. I'm sure it was well I did. I dare say, if he had stayed here much longer, he would have proposed to mamma next, and afterwards to the upper housemaid. I agree with you, papa, the champagne was too much for him.'

'I—I think he is fond of me,' said Katie, in a low and trembling tone. Her fingers are not playing with the cherry-coloured bow now, but her eyelids have borrowed largely of its tint.

'Don't be a goose, Katie,' said the youngest Miss Brownrig, kindly but scornfully; 'you don't suppose any of us would marry him now after the way he has behaved. Do have some little pride.'

'Perhaps he is mad,' said Hetty vaguely. Just at this moment, as a salve to her wounded vanity, she would have been glad to believe him so.

'No, my dear,' declared Lily calmly; 'he has no brains worth turning.'

'He said something, papa, about calling to-day at four o'clock,' said Katie very faintly.

'Then I shall sit here till four,' returned Mr. Brownrig, in an awful tone. 'I shall sit here until *five*; and then I

shall get up, and go out and find that young man, and give him such a horse-whipping as I warrant you he never got before in all his life.'

'Don't be too hard on him, papa,' entreated Katie weakly.

'I sha'n't, my dear, but my whip will,' said papa grimly.

So he waited until five; he waited till half-past five; and then he took up a certain heavy gold-knobbed whip that lay stretched on the table as though in readiness, and sallied forth in search of Snooks's rooms. And he found them, and Snooks too—in bed, suffering from a severe catarrh, caught, I presume, in the laurel avenue.

And no man knows what he did to Snooks. But at least he gave him an increased desire for his bed, because for a fortnight afterwards he never stirred out of it.

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When Mr. Wilding heard of all this, I regret to say he gave way to noisy mirth in the privacy of his chambers; and was actually caught by his washerwoman—who peeped through the keyhole—performing a wild dance in the middle of the floor.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

CHAPTER I.

‘Is it very bad? Do you think it will mark her? How unfortunate I am.’

‘Oh, it won’t signify—*much*,’ says the major, making a feeble attempt at consolation.

The groom is on his knees washing down the mare’s leg. As he washes, the red raw patch shows out with ominous distinctness from the glossy dark-brown skin that surrounds it; and Cissy, standing in her riding-habit, whip in hand, regarding the operation, begins to look the very picture of ill-concealed misery.

‘How dreadfully bad it looks now,’ she says fearfully.

‘Not at all,’ replies the major.

‘I cannot imagine how it happened; she is usually such a clean jumper,’ goes on Cissy, diligently searching for excuses. ‘I never in my life injured a mount before, and I would not have harmed *this* one for all the world. Captain Halkett will be so awfully angry.’

‘Nonsense! You don’t suppose he will bite you, do you? Think of his angelic temper and your privileges as a woman. He daren’t blow you up, you know.’

‘It is not so much that’—with hesitation. ‘Of course I know he will *say* nothing, but he will *think* the more; and—’

‘Like the parrot,’ interrupts the major.

‘And he will look so annoyed,’ goes on Cissy, torturing herself with immense success. ‘I would not for anything it had occurred. I do think I am the unluckiest girl on earth.’

‘Are you in love with him?’ suddenly asks the major sharply.

‘In love with him? What an absurd question! Of course

I am not,' says Cissy angrily, while blushing in the most furious and uncalled-for manner. What *can* have put such a ridiculous idea into your head ?'

'Well'—sulkily—'you are so afraid of vexing him, for one thing.'

'Not a bit more afraid of him than I would be of you or any other man, under the circumstances,' declares Cissy with exemplary candour. 'But it is not a pleasant thing at any time to injure a favourite hunter; and the mare, for some reason or other, is a special darling with Captain Halkett. Indeed, it was only yesterday I heard him saying he valued her more than any animal he had ever had.'

'Given him by one of the fair sex, most likely,' says the major with vicious intent.

'Very probably,' returns Cissy quietly, who carries a very game little heart beneath her pretty Irish skin, and would have died rather than betray any undue emotion. Nevertheless, it must be confessed her colour faintly wavers and fades away a little, only to return with tenfold brilliance as she sees Captain Halkett pass the stable window.

'Here he is!' she cries hurriedly. 'Now, what *shall* I do ?'

'Nothing, if my advice is worth anything,' says the major sententiously.

Captain Halkett coming slowly up the yard, cigar in mouth as usual, and hands thrust deep in the pockets of his shooting-coat, sees Cissy, Major Blake—and the groom on his knees beside the mare. He takes in the whole situation at a glance. Throwing away his cigar, he turns to Cissy and says pleasantly: 'Good-morning, Miss Mordaunt. Had a good day, I hope ?'

'Yes; thanks—very—that is, *no*, not at all,' says Cissy nervously. 'I am afraid you will be horribly angry. But the fact is, Major Blake and I were coming quietly home—cantering through the Park fields, at the last gap some sharp stone caught the Baby's leg, and has hurt her, as you see. I—I am *very* sorry about it,' concludes Miss Mordaunt, genuinely vexed for the mishap.

'Don't say that,' entreats Halkett gently; 'and don't vex yourself. I would rather the mare was dead than that you tormented yourself about her. Besides'—stooping to examine the injury—'from what I can see it is only skin-deep, and won't matter in a day or two; eh, Connor ?'

‘Yes, sir; only a scratch, sir. Right as ever in a week, sir.’

These words carry balm to Miss Mordaunt’s breast; and presently, the bandages being finally adjusted and the Baby consoled by an additional feed, they leave the stables; and Blake diverging to the right, Miss Mordaunt and Halkett go leisurely towards the house.

As they reach the stone steps leading to the hall door, Cissy pauses. ‘You are *sure* you forgive me?’ she asks sweetly.

‘How can you speak to me like that!’ says Halkett, almost angry. ‘Did you think I should cut up rough with *you*? What an ill-tempered brute you must consider me; you ought to know me better by this time.’

‘I have not known you for so very long,’ says Cissy smiling; then impulsively, while her colour once more deepens, ‘why is that horse such a favourite with you?—beyond all others, I mean. Was it a present?’

‘Yes,’ says Halkett in a low voice.

‘From a very dear friend?’

‘Very dear; more than a friend.’

‘From—a gentleman?’

‘No. From a lady,’ says Halkett shortly, and turns away his head.

On the instant, the words the major had uttered in the stables come back to Miss Mordaunt’s mind, and without further comment she sweeps past Halkett into the house, and he sees her no more until dinner-time.

When half-past seven chimes out, and the solemn retainer of the house of Mordaunt announces dinner as being served, both Major Blake and Captain Halkett make a hard fight of it to take Miss Cissy down; but Fate, in the person of Sir Thomas Lobin, interferes, and balks them of their prey. Halkett, however, may be said to have the best of it, as he succeeds in seating himself directly opposite his Irish divinity, and so can watch the changes of her beloved face, and perhaps edge in a word or two, addressed particularly to her, during the repast. All this can be the more readily accomplished, as he has been told off to a young lady who, if not actually insane, is at all events three parts silly, and so does not feel it incumbent upon him to supply her with the orthodox amount of small-talk.

Major Blake falling into line, finds himself presently situated somewhat low down, with Mrs. Fairfax on one side of him, and Grace Elton, a cousin of Cissy’s, on the other. If

it were not that his thoughts are altogether centred on Miss Mordaunt, he might have considered himself in luck, as he is undoubtedly in very good quarters. Grace Elton is as unaffected as she is charming, and extremely pretty into the bargain. But the major will neither acknowledge nor see anything beyond the tip of Cissy's nose, as it shows itself provokingly every now and then from behind the epergne.

On a line with Sir Thomas, and the third from him, sits Mrs. Leyton, the Indian widow, in a ravishing costume of pearl and blue that speaks alone of Worth. She is looking wonderfully handsome to-night, and has a bright adorable spot on each cheek that is *not* born of rouge. She is keeping her hand in by trying a little mild flirtation with the vicar, who occupies her right, and is making very pretty play; while his daughter—who is almost too young for society—watching them from the opposite side, finds her mind much exercised, and wonders in her heart if Mrs. Leyton is *really* very fond of papa. Surely she *must* be; else why does she raise her large soft dark eyes so tenderly to his once in every three minutes precisely, by the marble clock on the chimney-piece?

Aunt Isabel, at the head of the table, is radiant as usual, and dispenses roast turkey and smiles with equal alacrity. She is carving with even more than her customary vigour and well-known proficiency, while at the same time she is listening to and adding a word here and there to every topic under discussion. She is, however, particularly attentive to Miss Lobin, who sits beside her, and who is as deaf as a post; though no trouble to anyone except herself, poor lady, as she seeks not for conversation, and as long as she gets a bit of everything mentioned in the *menu*, is perfectly content.

There are two or three stray men from the neighbouring barracks scattered up and down; and these with the three Misses Brighton—who being evidently not cut out by mother Nature for the civil service, have been considered suitable to ask to meet them—make up the party.

'Well, Cis, you had a pleasant day, I hope?' says Uncle Charlie, presently addressing his favourite niece.

'A delicious day, dear uncle; only we wound up with a misfortune. I was stupid enough to hurt Captain Halkett's horse on my way home through the Park; though indeed I scarcely think it was my fault. However, as it *was* to happen, we were lucky in having it occur at the end instead of the beginning of our day, as we had our ride in spite of it.'

As she makes this little speech, she never once glances at Halkett (indeed she has taken no notice of him since the commencement of dinner), and purposely treats the whole thing as unworthy of regret. Halkett, contrasting her pretty contrition of the morning with this off-hand dismissal of the matter, is, manlike, thoroughly mystified.

‘I am sorry to hear of an accident,’ says Uncle Charlie, who holds all good animals dear to his heart; ‘nothing serious, I hope, Frank?’

‘A mere scratch,’ returns Halkett carelessly.

‘That is right. It could not have happened through any great desire on the rider’s part to reach her home, as she delayed her return so long we all imagined an elopement had taken place. But there was no such excitement in store for us. I do think, as your guardian and uncle, Cis, I have every right to know what you and the major were talking of all that time.’

‘Politics,’ says the major lightly; ‘we never talk anything but politics, do we, Miss Mordaunt?’

Here Blake dodges to one side of the epergne, that he may the more surely get a full view of Miss Mordaunt’s face.

‘*Never*,’ replies Cissy emphatically, dodging the epergne in her turn; and then they both laugh.

Here Halkett mutters something under his breath that is so far audible as to rouse the silly young lady by his side into some kind of life. She sighs and uplifts her head.

‘Were you speaking to me?’ she asks in a somewhat startled tone.

‘No—yes—was I?’ stammers Halkett, rather shocked. ‘I *ought* to have been, of course; but I have fallen so low as to allow dinner to engross all my attention. Pray forgive me. It comes entirely of going down to dinner with a middle-aged gourmet.’

‘Dear me—I fancied you quite young,’ responds his companion with a simper; and lapses again into silence after the effort.

‘Politics!’ says Uncle Charlie, going back to the subject, after he has desired the butler to take several different dishes to Miss Lobin. ‘How you must have enjoyed yourself—especially Cissy. I never met any woman with such keen and comprehensive views on all matters connected with the State. It was only yesterday I asked her opinion of Gladstone, and she told me she always thought he was——’

'Now—Uncle Charlie,' interrupts Miss Mordaunt, with such indignation that the old gentleman, though chuckling to himself audibly, refuses all further information.

'May we not hear your opinion of Gladstone?' demands Sir Thomas, who is an old beau, and much addicted to Miss Mordaunt.

'Certainly not. And remember I distinctly forbid you to ask Uncle Charlie any questions when my back is turned; as he is capable of saying *anything* once my eye is off him.'

'Your will is my law,' says the old beau, with a bow that would have reflected credit on a Chesterfield; and shortly afterwards, at a signal from Aunt Isabel, the ladies, rising, leave the gentlemen to their own devices.

On entering the drawing-room, Mrs. Leyton walking with the undulating graceful motion that belongs to her, and that cannot be acquired, goes straight to the fireplace, where she sinks into a lounging-chair, leaving the opposite one for Aunt Isabel, who almost instantly falls into a gentle doze. Little Miss Millar, the vicar's daughter, losing sight of her shyness in her desire to obtain her object, seeks a resting-place that will enable her still to keep a fascinated watch over Mrs. Leyton, the widow having cast a glamour over the timid country maiden. The Misses Brighton and Grace Elton keep up a continual chatter, and are evidently enjoying themselves immensely; while Miss Lobin taking the cozy corner of the sofa, emulates her hostess, and letting her face lengthen until it reaches a state of utter imbecility, sweetly snoozes.

Cissy is standing in one of the windows, somewhat apart; she gazes out upon the stilly night, and softly cogitates. She cannot quite make up her mind whether she has been most sinned against or sinning; she cannot wholly approve her conduct at dinner, and finds it impossible to divest herself entirely of the idea that Halkett was looking miserable the entire time. But all men make a point of appearing injured when placed in the wrong position, and of course he had not liked her cross-examination of the morning. Yet again, why should he *not* receive presents from women? What right had she to question act or word of his? No matter what thoughts and hopes she may have encouraged in the secret recesses of her heart, she feels now she has no certain data to go upon to prove that Halkett cares for her beyond all others. Somebody—who was it?—had said he was a flirt. Well, one thing was positive—he should not flirt with *her*.

Here Aunt Isabel, slowly rousing, sneezes and a-hems audibly, to let her friends know she has not been sleeping.

‘Cissy, child,’ she says, ‘you will be perished over there. Come to the fire and warm yourself.’

‘I am warm, thank you, and quite comfortable.’

‘My love, I don’t believe it,’ with extreme mildness; ‘it is freezing as hard as it can, and there is always a draught near a window. Come here, when I desire you.’

‘Oh, I shall die near that blazing log.’

‘And *I* shall die if you remain over there,’ says Aunt Isabel; and carries her point.

‘Better I than you, auntie,’ says Miss Mordaunt, and coming over good-humouredly, kneels down beside her kinswoman.

‘Cold hands—warm heart,’ murmurs the old lady, caressing the soft white fingers that lie upon her lap.

‘A troublesome possession,’ remarks Mrs. Leyton with a lazy smile. ‘No one is *really* happy in this world except he or she who carries an empty bosom.’

‘Are *you* happy?’ asks Miss Cissy innocently.

‘Almost. The little worn-out article that beats here’—laying her hand over the region of the heart—‘has pulsations hardly strong enough to cause me any uneasiness. Now and then I feel a faint pang—not often.’

‘I would rather keep my heart, even at the expense of my suffering,’ says Cissy warmly. ‘She who cannot feel anguish can know no perfect joy. Without love, life is a mistake, an unutterably stupid gift. That is how *I* think; but then I am Irish, and therefore of course unreasonable.’

‘Oh, no!’ says Mrs. Leyton graciously. ‘The Irish are the most charming people in the world—so light-hearted, so quick to sympathise. Though I have been here only two days, and have asked no questions, I knew you to be Irish before you told me. Most of my friends come from your land; even Captain Halkett is half Irish, his mother being from Galway.’

‘Yes?’ says Cissy. She rather shrinks from mention of Halkett’s name, and remembers with a slight pang how friendly have seemed his relations with Mrs. Leyton since her arrival. ‘Have you known Captain Halkett long?’ she cannot help asking.

‘All my life. His father and mine were fast friends; our childhood was spent together. Then we separated’—with a sigh, that sounds ominous to Cissy, but in reality is only born

of past sorrow, utterly unconnected with him in any way—‘to meet again after many years in India, and now—here. One way or another, all through, Frank’s life has been mixed up with mine.’

Cissy bites her lip, and asks no more questions ; but Mrs. Leyton notices the action of the white teeth, and ponders.

‘There is a great charm in Frank’s manner, I think ?’ she says interrogatively.

‘Is there ? Most men nowadays are charming, as acquaintances,’ replied Cissy carelessly. ‘And Captain Halkett is too universal a favourite to be altogether charming to *one*.’

‘Poor Frank !’ laughs the widow lightly. ‘He is unfortunate ; or at least has found some one who cannot appreciate him. Then you mean to say you would find it impossible to care for any man who liked some other woman besides yourself ?’

‘Well, as you ask me the question, I confess I would,’ says Cissy, who is feeling irritated, she scarcely knows why. ‘I would divide honours with no one, and I would be winner—or nothing.’

‘Then the man you love must be civil to no one else ?’—with arched eyebrows indicative of surprise.

‘Oh, “*civil* !” Let him be as civil as he pleases. If you were talking merely of civility, I altogether misunderstood you. I only meant if I had a lover—which at the present moment I certainly have not—I would wish to be first in his eyes. Let him be *civil* to all the world, but let him love *me*.’

‘Quite so ; that is only fair, I think,’ says the widow, but she looks immensely amused ; and Cissy, seeing her expression, feels her wrath rising. ‘I quite thought—judging from appearances—that you and Captain Halkett were very good friends,’ goes on Mrs. Leyton unwisely, and regrets her speech a moment later.

‘I beg you will not judge *me* from appearances,’ says Miss Mordaunt haughtily. ‘A woman of the world as you are, Mrs. Leyton, ought surely to know that people for the most part do not feel everything they may look. And besides, you must forgive me, but if there is one thing I have a particular objection to, it is being watched and commented upon.’

‘You are right,’ returns Mrs. Leyton with suspicious sweetness ; ‘I fear I have been very indiscreet ; for the future I will not *watch* you and Captain Halkett.’

There is a covert meaning in this speech that is absolutely

maddening; but the entrance of the gentlemen puts a stop to Miss Mordaunt's reply. She withdraws slowly, and seats herself upon a distant lounge, where she is immediately joined by Major Blake.

'I hope you have missed me,' he says with a tender glance, pushing aside her trailing skirts that he may gain room for his huge person. 'I assure you the time those men spent over their wine was actionable; while I was tantalised by dreams of fair women the entire two hours.'

'Two hours! What an exaggeration. Why, by Aunt Isabel's watch, that was never known to lose a minute, it was only half an hour.'

'What to me was two hours, to you was but a fourth of the time. How cruel an interpretation may be put upon your words! And I have been buoying myself up with the hope while absent from you that when we *did* meet again I should hear something kind from your lips.'

'And so you shall,' says Miss Mordaunt, bestowing upon him a radiant smile, just to let 'that woman' see she is not pining for the recreant Frank. But unfortunately for the success of the thing Mrs. Leyton is looking the other way, and does not see it at all, while Frank Halkett does.

'Must I confess to you? Well, then, my accurate knowledge of the hour arose from my incessant glances at the watch, to see if your delay in coming was really as long as it appeared—to me.'

'If I thought you *meant* that'—begins Blake hesitatingly, with a sudden gleam in his eyes (what man but feels more valiant after dinner than before?)—'if I really thought you meant it——'

'Well—"if you really thought I meant it"—what would you do then? But no!' she cries hastily, seeing she has gone rather far, and unwilling to bring matters to a climax—'do not tell me; I do not wish to know. My ignorance in this case no doubt is blissful; I prefer to remain in it. And now to change the subject. Who is Mrs. Leyton? and what do you know about her? I am all curiosity where she is concerned.'

'Do you like her?' asks Blake, merely as a precautionary measure.

'I can't say I do—exactly,' replies the Irish girl candidly. 'Now tell me where you first met her.'

'In India. Her husband was alive when I first became

acquainted with her. He lived tremendously hard; but he was devoted to her, without doubt, and she to him; and she took his death awfully badly. Never saw a woman so cut up by anything before; they generally take it pretty sensibly after the first shock, but she didn't; and went to a skeleton in less than three months.'

'She is not very thin now.'

'No. I suppose one can't keep on pining for ever, and in course of time good food *will* cover one's bones. But she felt it no end for months, and was altogether down in her luck. You see he got rather a horrible death, as his horse first threw him, and then almost trampled him beyond recognition.'

'How dreadful!' murmurs Miss Mordaunt, with a little shiver; and wonders how Mrs. Leyton could ever have smiled afterwards.

'Yes; wasn't it? She took it so much to heart, that for years after she could not bear the sight of a horse, though she had the best seat in the regiment—among the women, I mean—and could not be induced to take a ride. Before leaving India, she sold, or gave away, every one of her horses.'

Here Cissy becomes intensely interested. 'To whom did she give them?' she asks indifferently.

'I hardly know; I was up-country at the time, but to her most intimate friends, I suppose. By-the-by, Halkett was an immense crony of hers.

'Indeed?'

'Never out of the house,' says the major, thinking it a good opportunity to improve his own chances, though really only giving voice to what had been the common report in that part of India where the catastrophe had occurred. 'After Tom Leyton's death he would have married her like a shot; but she would not hear of it. She is a very handsome woman, you know, and tremendously admired by some fellows, though for my part I don't altogether see it.'

'Don't you? I think her wonderfully pretty. Perhaps she will relent, and marry him now; who knows? Certainly his constancy deserves some reward. Was it Mrs. Leyton gave him the mare?'

'Don't know, I'm sure. But think it very likely, now you mention it, as he sets such uncommon store by her. How very well Mrs. Leyton is looking just now,' says the

major, adjusting his eye-glass with much care, and glancing significantly at the other end of the room, where sits the widow in earnest conversation with Frank Halkett. Cissy follows the direction of his gaze, but, conscious of his scrutiny, takes care that not one muscle of her face betrays what she is really feeling.

Yes, very well, very *handsome* looks Mrs. Leyton, as leaning gracefully back in her chair, with one hand toying idly with the rings that cover her fingers, she listens to Captain Halkett's conversation. Now and then she raises large dreamy eyes—half mirthful, half sympathetic—to his face, but scarcely interrupts him. He is talking with much earnestness—is apparently entirely engrossed by his subject—and takes no heed of what is going on around him. Presently he ceases, and evidently seeks an answer from his beautiful companion. She gives him one of her upward glances—all sympathy this time—and says a few words; but they are without doubt the right ones, as Halkett's face brightens, and a smile overspreads it that makes it positively handsome. At the moment he raises her hand, and bending over it, seems to examine her rings curiously. To Cissy the action almost bespeaks a betrothal, and renders her half indignant, wholly miserable. Nevertheless, turning to Major Blake, she says with a bright brave smile: 'I think my idea was right, and even now he has received his reward.'

'Looks uncommon like it,' says the major, with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER II.

HAD Cissy only known it, there was very little in Frank Halkett's words to cause her any uneasiness. On his entering the drawing-room, seeing his place by Cissy's side forestalled by the major, whose person intercepted the beaming smile of welcome she bestowed upon him, he had turned away and thrown himself into the low chair that stood by Mrs. Leyton's cosy lounge.

'So you have taken refuge with me,' says that lady with a quiet smile.

'Refuge!' repeats Halkett with an innocently puzzled air. 'No; I have only taken a seat.'

‘What’s the matter with you, Frank?’

‘Nothing. Why? Do I look dyspeptic?’

‘You don’t look pleasant, certainly, if that has anything to do with it. Come; I am a witch, you know,’ says Mrs. Leyton, ‘and so can tell all your secrets. And just to prove my power, I will tell you something now—you are sulky this evening.’

‘Meaning I am stupid, I suppose,’ says Halkett; ‘but it don’t take much witchery to discover that. I have an awful headache.’

‘Oh, but I have not half done yet. Shall I go on? I could tell something very important, but that I am afraid of your heavy displeasure. Will you promise not to be angry?’

‘Angry with *you*! Was I ever that?’ asks Halkett tenderly. ‘I give you full liberty to say anything on earth you like to me.’

‘Do you mean that?’

‘Certainly I mean it.’

‘Very good then,’ says the widow with lazy triumph; ‘I will continue my sorceries; and first—you are in love.’

“‘In love!’” reiterates Halkett, forcing himself heroically to meet her laughing eyes, and reddening very much in the attempt. ‘No, no; your witchcraft has played you false this time.’

‘It has not. I persist in my declaration. You are in love—hopelessly, irretrievably, desperately in love.’

‘Well, perhaps I am,’ says Frank, with tranquil resignation. ‘Is that strange? Could one bo with you, Frances, for so long a time, and not——’

‘Nonsense!’ interrupts Mrs. Leyton. ‘Do not trouble yourself to complete that sentence. We are much too old friends for *that*, I take it. And now, Frank, be a good boy; emulate your name, tell me all about it.’

‘I really don’t know that there is anything much to tell,’ says Halkett smiling. ‘But what there is you shall hear. I admire a certain young lady more than is good for me; I fancy, until to-day, she returns my regard. I discover a couple of hours ago that my vanity has misled me. I see her happy in the arms—no, in the society of another; I find myself nowhere, hence my dyspepsia, distraction, and despair. Don’t look so sympathetic, Frances; probably I shall get over it.’

Though he says this with a laughing face, Mrs. Leyton’s

dark eyes can see for themselves he is tremendously hard hit.

‘And what is her name?’ she asks sweetly.

‘Oh, Frances! You laying claim to be a witch, and must even ask *that* question! I decline to answer it. Your fairy lore should enable you to find out that much for yourself.’

‘I love my love with a C because she is candid; I hate her with a C because she is capricious,’ says Mrs. Leyton archly. ‘Am I “warm”? or will you still cry “cold”? If you do the latter, I doubt you will be wronging your conscience. Ah, Frank, I think I am one too many for you!’

‘You were always that. What one man is equal to any woman? Well, as you have guessed so far, I believe I may as well tell you the rest;’ and forthwith he commences to pour forth a tale, the telling of which had caused Cissy such exquisite anguish.

When he has finished, Mrs. Leyton says: ‘If you will take my advice, you will seek the first opportunity that offers, and ask for an explanation of her coldness.’

‘You really think that the best thing to do?’ says Halkett brightening. ‘I will act upon your advice then, and try my chance. Now let us forget it for the present. Is that a new ring upon your finger? May I look at it? Does it mark a fresh adorer?’

‘No; an old one. Geoffrey Hyde gave it to me last autumn.’ She surrenders her hand to him as she speaks; and he, bending over it, examines leisurely the cluster of brilliants that scintillate and flash beneath the lamp-light.

‘He has been faithful to you for a long time,’ says Halkett presently.

‘Yes; he is very tormenting. I really believe I shall have to marry him in the long-run, if only to get him out of the way. She reddens a little as she says this, and laughs rather nervously.

‘Are you serious?’ asks Halkett with surprise. ‘Then you are going to make him a happy man after all?’

‘That remains to be proved. Probably I shall make him a wholesome warning to all obstinate men. But I think when last I saw him I made him some foolish promise about marrying him in the spring.’

‘I congratulate him with all my heart, and you too,’ says Halkett cordially. ‘I think he is the only man I know *quite* worthy of you.’

When the hour comes for bedroom candles to be adjusted, Halkett seizes one, lights it, and carries it solemnly to Miss Mordaunt. But quick as he has been, Major Blake reaches her side similarly armed, almost at the same moment.

'Which shall I take?' says Miss Cissy gaily. 'I suppose I can have my choice. I think *this* pleases me most;' and she holds out her hand towards Blake with a pretty smile. 'Thank you,' she continues, slipping her slender fingers into his brown palm; 'and good-night. Don't smoke too much;' and with a little provoking backward nod she trips away, without bestowing so much as one poor glance upon Halkett. And so ends his first attempt at an explanation, leaving him so indignant that he almost vows he will not seek another.

All the following day Miss Mordaunt studiously avoids him, giving him no chance of obtaining the *tête-à-tête* she sees is impending. But Halkett calmly bides his time, knowing it cannot be far distant. As daylight fades he feels more than ever determined to bring her to book before the dawn of another morning; and in this instance at least the Fates favour him, as there is to be a large dancing-party at the Hall to-night. She cannot well refuse to give him one dance out of the many—such palpable avoidance would be rather *too* marked; and once he has secured her as his partner she must be at his mercy until the dance comes to an end.

This idea, of course, has also occurred to Miss Mordaunt, and though dreading the interview, she is still sufficiently indignant to cause her to make up her mind to be as curt and outspoken on the occasion as will be in strict keeping with her dignity. In this frame of mind she goes upstairs to dress, and, being an Irishwoman, it cannot be altogether said but that she sustains a rather pleasurable sensation—albeit one largely mingled with something very much akin to nervousness—as the battle-hour draws nigh.

'What shall I wear, Kennedy?' she asks her maid, sinking languidly into a chair.

'Well, miss, you know you look well in anything,' says Kennedy obligingly; 'there is nothing but what becomes you; but, if I might be allowed to suggest, you look lovely entirely in white.'

'I won't wear white; I hate it,' says her mistress pettishly. '*Débutantes*, and brides, and corpses wear white; I think—I shall wear—*black* to-night.'

'Black? Oh, Miss Mordaunt!'

'Yes; certainly. Is gay clothing so necessary to me, then?'

'Well, miss, there's no doubt but you look real handsome in black; but the other ladies—they will be so gay—and you——'

'I shall be gayer than any of them, and the greater contrast!' cries Cissy, springing to her feet. 'Come, Kennedy; despatch, despatch; I feel I shall hold my own yet.'

And Kennedy, throwing herself heart and mind into her task, soon turns out the most charming picture possible.

As Miss Mordaunt enters the drawing-room she sees Halkett standing on the hearth-rug in earnest conversation with the widow, who, if there is a fire anywhere, is never any great distance from it. He has been telling her of his repulse of the night before, and is looking somewhat dejected.

'Never mind,' says Mrs. Leyton kindly; 'get her *alone*; then *you* will have the advantage. I think she must have heard—or fancied—something that wounds her.'

'I do not flatter myself so far; I merely think she prefers Blake, and wishes to get rid of me,' says Halkett gloomily.

'Nonsense! Let nothing induce you to believe that. In the first place, she doesn't even *look* at the man in the right way.'

Halkett laughs in spite of himself, and immediately afterwards becomes if possible even more despondent than before.

'How can she like that fellow Blake?' he says ill-naturedly.

'Oh, I don't see *that*. For my part, I think him absolutely handsome.'

'Of course, that goes without telling. All women have a *tendresse* for those great coarse broad-shouldered men. And what an accent he has!'

'Do you really dislike it? To me, I confess, it is rather pleasant; mellow, with just a touch of the brogue. Your Cissy, you must remember, has it too, with perhaps rather more of the mellow and less of the brogue; but then you are prejudiced against this poor Blake.'

'Indeed I am not; you mistake me altogether: I think him a downright good fellow. In fact I have a fancy for all Irishmen; they are so full of go—clue—good-humour, *until crossed*. And Blake is like all his countrymen, a most enjoyable companion,' says Halkett with suspicious warmth.

'Evidently Miss Mordaunt is of your opinion,' says the

widow rather cruelly, pointing to where Cissy is listening with a smiling face to one of the major's good stories.

Meanwhile the guests are arriving; and the fine old room that has been given up to the dancers is rapidly filling with pretty girls and powdered dowagers and men of all ages and degrees. Papas too are numerous; but these instinctively crowd round Uncle Charlie, and by degrees edge towards a more dimly lighted room, where instinct tells them whist is holding silent sway.

'Will you give me the first dance?' says Halkett to Mrs. Leyton, who readily grants her consent. Major Blake has of course secured Cissy; and presently, as ill-luck will have it, they find themselves in the same set, dancing opposite to each other. As Halkett's hand meets Cissy's, he hardly lets his fingers close round hers; and as she is also in a revengeful mood, the ladies' chain almost falls to the ground. Mrs. Leyton, in spite of the good-nature that lies somewhere in her composition, nearly chokes with suppressed laughter as she witnesses this little by-play. She twits Halkett about it later on, but he is moody, and doesn't take kindly to her witticisms.

At least half the programme has been gone through before Captain Halkett asks Miss Mordaunt for a dance.

'If I am disengaged,' she says coldly, not looking at him, and searches her card with a languid bored air that tantalises him almost beyond endurance. He is longing to say: 'Never mind it; I won't interfere with your enjoyment this time,' with his sweetest smile, and rage at his heart; but he is too sternly determined to have it out with her to-night to let his natural feelings win the day.

Cissy examining her card finds she is not engaged for the next dance, very much to her disgust; and is pondering whether she shall tell the lie direct and declare she is, when Halkett, as though he divines her thoughts, says abruptly: 'Not engaged for the next? Then I suppose I may have it?'

'I suppose so,' returns Miss Cissy reluctantly; and instantly turning from him addresses her partner, as though such a person as Halkett were no longer in existence. Indeed, when after a quarter of an hour he finds her in the conservatory, and claims the fulfilment of her promise, it is with the utmost bad grace she places the very tips of her fingers upon his arm, and looks impatiently towards the ball-room.

'I don't mean dancing just yet; I have something particular to say to you first,' says Halkett hastily, and almost

commandingly, standing quite still. 'It is hardly private here. Would you find it too cold to come with me into the garden?' glancing at the open door of the conservatory.

Cissy hesitates; then, fearful of seeming reluctant, says: 'No. If you will go to the library for my shawl (you will find it on the sofa), I will go with you.'

'You will stay here until I return?' says Halkett, regarding her intently.

Cissy stares in turn. 'Of course I will,' she answers rather haughtily; and he goes.

'Did he imagine I would run away when his back was turned?' she soliloquizes angrily. 'Does he suppose I am *afraid*? One would think it was *I* was in the wrong, not he. His conduct altogether is downright mysterious. I cannot understand him;' and for the first time it dawns upon her that there may possibly be some flaw in the interpretation she has put upon his conduct.

Returning with the shawl, Halkett places it gently round her shoulders, and they pass into the quiet night.

'What a beautiful moon!' exclaims Cissy presently, hardly knowing what to say.

'Yes;' absently.

'And for this time of year, how wonderfully mild it is—not in the least cold—as one might expect.'

'Yes—no—is it not?'

'I really don't know what *you* think about it,' says Miss Mordaunt impatiently. 'I for my part find it almost warm; but of course I cannot answer for you. Probably all this time you are feeling desperately cold.'

This little petulant outburst rouses Halkett.

'No!' he says with sudden energy and warmth; 'I am *not*. It is not in my nature to be cold in any way. I feel most things keenly: more especially slights from those I love. All ill-concealed disdain, unkind speeches, fickleness, touch me closely.'

'I can sympathise with you,' says Cissy calmly. 'I think nothing can be so bad as inconstancy—except perhaps deceit.'

This retort being as unexpected as it is evidently *meant*, puzzles Halkett to such a degree that he becomes absolutely silent. Miss Mordaunt, with her white shawl drawn closely round her slight black-robed figure, walks quietly beside him with the air of an offended queen, her head held rather higher than usual, a pretty look of scorn upon her lips.

After a while Halkett pulls up abruptly and faces her in the narrow pathway. 'What is the reason of your changed behaviour towards me to-day and yesterday?' he says shortly. 'I think I have a right to ask that.'

'Have I changed?'

'Have you? Must you ask the question? The whole world can see it. You treat me with the most studied coldness.'

'I thought I was treating you with as much courtesy as I give to all my uncle's guests.'

'I don't care for courtesy,' says Halkett passionately; 'your hatred would be better than your indifference. Yesterday morning I believed we were friends—nay, *more* than that; yesterday evening you ignored me altogether. It is either heartless coquetry on your part, or else you have a reason for your conduct. Let me hear it.'

'You are forgetting yourself,' says Miss Mordaunt coldly. 'You are the first person who has ever accused me of coquetry; you shall not do it again. I was foolish to come here with you, but—I trusted you. I wish to return to the house.'

'Nay, hear me!' cries Halkett remorsefully, following as she makes a movement to leave him, and catching her hand to detain her. 'Your avoidance has so perplexed and maddened me that I said more than I meant or intended. Forgive me, and at least let me know how I have offended. Cissy, answer me!'

For a moment Miss Mordaunt hesitates, then endeavouring to speak lightly: 'I did not intend to perplex you,' she says; 'one cannot speak to everyone at the same time. I am sorry if I appeared rude or neglectful; but you did not *look* very miserable, and surely Mrs. Leyton was an excellent substitute for me.' She smiles as she says this, but pales a little too beneath the brilliant moon that is betraying her.

'Mrs. Leyton is my very oldest and dearest friend,' replies Halkett; 'but no one on earth could console me for—your loss. Why will you not confess the truth, Cissy, and——'

'Yet you once loved her, if report speaks truly,' interrupts Miss Mordaunt, still speaking carelessly, though her heart-throbs can almost be counted. 'In India, we hear, there was a time when you would gladly have called her your wife. Is it not so?'

Halkett drops her hand.

'Has that miserable bit of gossip taken root even here?'

he says with a faint sneer. 'Has Blake been making his cause good by such rubbishing tales? Frances Leyton and I grew up together. I would as soon think of making love to my nearest of kin as to her. The idea of any romantic attachment existing between us is more than absurd! Besides, she is to be married to Geoffrey Hyde early in the coming spring.'

Miss Mordaunt severs a little twig from one of the shrubs, and takes it to pieces slowly.

'Then *she* did not give you your favourite mare?' she says quietly, detesting herself as she asks the question, yet feeling compelled to solve all her doubts at once.

'No; she did not.' A pause. 'Shall I tell you who gave her to me? It was my only sister, Lady Harley. She loved The Baby dearly, and on her death-bed told me to take good care of the creature, for her sake.'

The twig falls from Cissy's fingers. Surely, surely it cannot be true! Oh, how he must hate and despise her for all she has said and done! It is too late to make reparation. She feels she would rather die a thousand deaths than give in, and confess to all the wretched suspicions and jealousies she has been carefully harbouring in her heart during these two past days.

'However, all this is beside the question,' goes on Halkett; 'you have not yet told me what I so much want to know. Has Blake anything to do with your coldness to me? Tell me, Cissy, are you engaged to him?'

Cissy has not expected this, and growing suddenly crimson, lets her head droop somewhat suspiciously. Halkett's eyes are on her face.

'No; of course not—I am not indeed.' There is a faint stammer in her speech as she says this, and Halkett's fears become certainties.

'But you *care* for him!' he exclaims vehemently. 'The very mention of his name has brought a flush into your cheeks. You hesitate, and turn your head aside. This then accounts for your sudden change of behaviour towards me! Having gained your point, you found your first victim in the way, and hardly knowing how to get rid of so troublesome an appendage, had recourse to—— Had you told me point-blank my attentions were unwelcome, it would have been more womanly, more just——'

'Pray, do not say another word,' says Miss Mordaunt with

dignity, though tears are in her voice and eyes; 'this is the second time to-night you have spoken words difficult to forget. Do not trouble yourself to return with me. I prefer going in alone.'

When Cissy and Halkett appear at breakfast the following morning, they take care to seat themselves as far as possible from each other, and presently it becomes palpable to everyone that they are considerably out of sorts. Uncle Charlie suggests that Miss Cissy has over-danced herself, or given the wrong man his *cong  *; a remark that has sufficient truth in it to bring the hot blood into her cheeks. While Captain Halkett, having run through his letters, declares he must return to town by the afternoon train; at which Mrs. Leyton looks uneasy, and casts a covert glance at Cissy Mordaunt.

That young lady stands fire pretty well, but with all her hardihood cannot keep her underlip from trembling ever so little. This sign of weakness be assured does not escape the widow's tutored eye; and she instantly challenges Major Blake to a game of billiards after breakfast.

'My dear Frank, you can't go to-day,' says Uncle Charlie decidedly. 'To-morrow they have promised us the best run we have had yet. I will not hear of your leaving. Write and tell her you have sprained your ankle, and send her your undying love. She will forgive you when she sees you.'

'I wish I *could* stay,' says Halkett laughing; 'but unfortunately my recall is from my solicitor, not from my lady-love.'

I don't believe a word of it!' says Uncle Charlie. 'A sudden recall *always* means a woman. Why, when I was a young man, I thought nothing of——'

'My dear!' says Aunt Isabel, with a gentle uplifting of the right hand.

'Quite so, my good Belle,' returns Uncle Charlie, patting the soft white fingers. 'But seriously, Frank, she will do very well without you.'

'I have no doubt of *that*,' says Halkett, and raising his eyes meets Miss Mordaunt's full.

Half an hour later Cissy, feeling mournful and guilty, steals round to the stables to take a last look at The Baby, as she is afraid to look at The Baby's master. Just as she is patting her and rubbing down the soft velvet muzzle, the door opens, and Halkett enters.

‘I am glad to see she is so much better,’ says Miss Mordaunt promptly but nervously, pointing to the injured limb. ‘If you go to-day, you will not take her with you, I suppose?’

‘No; I suppose not.’

‘*Must* you go?’

Halkett glances at her reproachfully. ‘Yes; of course I must. There is no other course left open to me. After what you told me last night, it would be simple madness to remain.’

‘What did I tell you? I don’t think I told you anything.’

‘Well—what you led me to infer.’

‘You should not infer things. I never meant you to do so.’ As Miss Mordaunt says this in a very low tone she turns her head aside and recedes a step or two. A dark flush rises to Halkett’s brow, colouring all his face, even through the bronze an Indian sun has laid upon it. A sudden gleam of something akin to hope shines in his eyes for an instant, but is as speedily suppressed.

‘Do you know what you are doing?’ he says in a tone sufficiently unsteady to betray the agitation he is feeling. ‘Do you know what your manner, your words seem to me to mean? Do not, I implore you, raise within me again the hope I have surrendered, unless—— Oh, Cissy, *you* will never know how cruel a thing it is to love without return!’

‘But—are you sure—*your* love—has gained no return?’ demands Miss Cissy in faltering accents, and immediately afterwards feels she has but one desire on earth, and that is for the ground to open and swallow her up.

‘Cissy, Cissy!’ cries Halkett, ‘*tell* me you do not care for that fellow Blake!’

‘Not a bit, not a bit!’ says Cissy; and in another moment finds herself in Halkett’s arms, her tears running riot over the breast of his coat. ‘Oh, say that you forgive me!’ she sobs. ‘It was most hateful of me—about that bedroom candlestick the other night, and everything. But I misunderstood it all. I thought you loved Mrs. Leyton. *Say* that you forgive me!’

‘I will not hear a word about forgiveness now,’ says Halkett, who has been assiduously employed in kissing her hair, brow, and any other part of her face that is visible. ‘It is taking a mean advantage of me; I am so happy this

moment, I would forgive my bitterest enemy without hesitation. By-and-by we will discuss the question, and I shall grant you pardon on my own terms.'

Some time before luncheon there comes a knock, low but decided, at Uncle Charlie's library door.

'Come in!' calls out the owner of the apartment; and the door opening admits Frank Halkett and Miss Mordaunt—the latter keeping well behind, and only compelled by the strong clasp of her companion's hand to advance at all.

'I have come, sir,' says Halkett mildly, 'to tell you I have, after all, decided on delaying my departure until next week, as I at first intended—if you do not object.'

'Indeed, indeed; I am glad of that,' says Uncle Charlie, just a wee bit puzzled. 'I need not say how welcome you are. But ~~what~~ about the business letter, eh, and your hot haste to reach town? What has changed your plans, eh?'

'Miss Mordaunt,' says Halkett, with a mischievous glance at Cissy, who is hopelessly confused and horribly shamefaced, in the background. 'Miss Mordaunt has induced me to alter my mind.'

'Eh? what, what?' says Uncle Charlie, rising from his chair as the truth dawns upon him, and instantly sinking back into it again. 'You don't mean it! And all this time I could have *sworn* it was that fellow Blake!'

HER FIRST APPEARANCE.

‘BUT, my dear,’ remarks the Countess mildly, laying down the third volume of her novel, which is a concession, ‘you will find it so slow, so dull. Ireland at any time, under *any* circumstances, is too bizarre for ordinary tastes; but an Irish *village*! Mrs. Wyndham is very charming, I allow, but still, dear Gwen, if I were you I should reconsider it.’

‘Why? The more bizarre it is, the more I shall enjoy it. I am tired of conventionality and everyday life. Then I shall be with Georgie, and she is, as you have just said, a very *dear*. Besides which, by going I shall escape Berlie’s insufferable attentions.’

‘I wish you would reconsider that also,’ says the Countess, with a faint sigh. ‘Lord Berlie is rich, quite old family, and——’

‘Handsome, old, and stupid, and *very* good-natured, especially to me. I know it all, dear,’ with a shrug. ‘No, I sha’n’t marry him, mamma, if that is what you mean. I am sure,’ glancing with a smile at her own lovely image in the mirror opposite, ‘I deserve better at the hands of fate, and something tells me I shall get it.’

‘He is the best *parti* in town. Where do you hope to find a better?’—with languid impatience.

‘Perhaps in my Irish village,’ replies Gwendoline gaily; whereupon Lady Rosemary throws up the argument in despair, and returns to her novel with raised brows.

It was all the fault of Jemima Jane’s mother! There couldn’t be a doubt of it. Jemima Jane certainly behaved badly, but her mother was the primary cause of all the discomfort. What *could* have made the wretched woman elect to get ill on the very morning of Mrs. Wyndham’s clerical party, except a vicious desire to create confusion all round?

She sent word very early to the parsonage, before any of the domestics were awake, to say she had a 'stitch,' whatever that might mean, and Jemima Jane instantly declared a 'stitch' was nearly always fatal (she, at all events, seemed to know everything about it), and that she should go to her mother forthwith.

Mrs. Wyndham reasoned, argued, grew angry, all to no avail; told Jemima, what she already knew full well, that there were eight clergymen coming to dinner, eight *hungry* clergymen, and asked her pathetically who was to attend table with the boy, who was quite unsafe alone, being given to the breaking of glass and constant dropping of choice viands. Jemima Jane said she couldn't help it; her mother was evidently at the last gasp, and if it cost her a thousand places go to her she would. At this Mrs. Wyndham, abandoning hope, sat down and wept.

All this happened at ten o'clock in the morning, a week after Gwendoline's arrival. At eleven, Mrs. Wyndham being in sore need of comfort, and literally at her wits' end, rises and seeks her friend's chamber, prepared to pour her sorrows into her sympathetic breast.

'Can anything be more humiliating, my dear?' she says, tears again rising to her pretty brown eyes, as she finishes her recital. 'I don't think I should mind so *very* much, but that Mr. Layton is coming, and John was at his house last week' (John is Mr. Wyndham), 'and everything there was so nicely managed, and the attendance perfect. I assure you, my dear Gwendoline, I feel absolutely faint when I picture to myself that boy in the parlour, unsupported.'

'It is really terrible,' says Gwendoline, who is looking as concerned as anyone could desire. She is looking thoughtful, too, as though she was hatching a conspiracy, and has let all her forehead run into little puckers. 'Tell me, Georgie,' she says presently, 'do you appear?'

'No, not on such occasions. They only discuss theology, they say, and I don't care about it.'

'Then set your mind at rest. I shall solve the difficulty for you—yes, *I myself*!' rising to her feet with charming energy. 'I have often told you how in private theatricals I am quite perfect as an upper housemaid. To-day I shall prove to you that my words were not empty boasting.'

'I don't understand'—bewildered—'you mean——'

'That I shall take the place of the perfidious Jemima; I

shall attend! I shall strike terror to the heart of the boy, and I shall report to you later on whether it is indeed theology, or (what I strongly suspect) gossip, that those eight parsons discuss.'

'You must be mad,' says Mrs. Wyndham, breaking into a hearty laugh—'utterly out of your senses; fancy John's sensations when you said "Fowl, sir?"' Fancy his horror when he saw you in the regulation dress, cap and all! My dear girl, think of your position; people don't have London belles to wait upon them.'

'That is just it,' with growing delight. 'There is nothing like being out of the common, and I look absolutely delicious in a cap—it suits me tremendously. I have a linen gown that will answer very well, and you must provide an apron. Now, Georgie, don't dream of preventing me. Don't you know I always get my own way in the end?'

She gets it; and when arrayed in the exquisitely fitting linen gown, white apron, and daintiest of caps, looks so bewitching that Mrs. Wyndham tells her dinner will be a superfluity, as they will all be too fully engaged admiring her to allow time for mere eating.

The guests have all arrived; they are in the drawing-room, from whence the dull monotonous sound of their voices reaches even to the dining-room, where Mrs. Wyndham is still overpowering her new maid with final directions.

The boy is on his way to announce dinner, and all is going merry as a marriage bell, when a loud knock at the hall door startles the conspirators.

'My dear!' says Mrs. Wyndham with a slight gasp, 'who *can* it be?'

'Not the bishop, I hope devoutly,' returns her companion, with affected dismay.

A minute later a voice in the hall, answering a warm greeting from Mr. Wyndham, makes itself heard. Georgie turns pale.

'It is Hilary—Sir Hilary Tremaine,' she says in a ghastly whisper; 'that college chum of John's I have so often told you about. Now it will not do for you to act servant before him. He is only just home from the East, and he will certainly be in town for the next season; you may meet him there, he would recognise you, and——'

'Nothing shall prevent my doing my duty,' interrupts Gwendoline solemnly. 'You have hired me for "this night

only," and go through with it I *will*. Not for a dozen Sir Hilaries would I throw up my engagement. Georgie, run away, I think I hear them coming !'

Dinner is an undoubted success. The new maid proves a perfect treasure, and does her part *à merveille*. Even 'the boy' is held in such awe by the beauty of her demeanour, and the eye she keeps sternly fixed upon him, that for once he comports himself passably, and does not drop more than a plate or two and an empty wine-glass during the short time he is in attendance.

Gwendoline appears quite at home in her *rôle*, and enjoys it thoroughly ; never before has she felt herself—in such reality—before the footlights, and she treads the boards with consummate grace and ease. One only circumstance occurs to cause her the faintest embarrassment—one only of all the guests gives her some slight uneasiness.

This is Sir Hilary Tremaine, who by the merest accident has arrived at the parsonage on this momentous evening, intending to spend it with his old friend, as he passes through the quaint little village of Ballykillruddereen, on his way to the capital. It is a common trick of his to walk in upon the Wyndhams without warning—being a special favourite of theirs—but it is perhaps a little unfortunate he should have chosen this particular night for one of his chance visits.

He is a young man, very good-looking, very well bred, very rich, altogether *chic* ; he has dark eyes, with a rather plaintive expression in them, eminently becoming, and these dark eyes pursue with indefatigable zeal each movement of the lovely maid. He seems puzzled, amazed, perplexed, so much so that at times he actually forgets to answer his neighbour's mild remarks, until at length that good man declines to address him further, and regards him pityingly for the remainder of the evening as one hopelessly devoid of hearing. At other times he rouses himself from his contemplation with a disgusted start, and goes on with his neglected dinner, while inwardly abusing himself for the execrably bad form he is displaying, in allowing himself to look admiringly upon his friend's domestic. There must be something wrong with him ; he certainly *has* felt seedy for the last two or three days. No, he will neither think of her, nor look at her again ; he will——

'Champagne or hock, sir ?' says a charming voice at his elbow, and in an instant all his good resolutions melt away ;

again he finds himself wondering why such a matchless face should have the cap of servitude above it. To be sure it is a perfectly ravishing cap of its kind—but still it is a cap! And——

‘Champagne,’ he says mechanically, and is helped by a hand white as a newly-fallen snowflake.

Later on she brings him some *confection* in which he has expressed a languid interest, and as she lays it before him a conviction that he is grossly ungentlemanly consumes him. It is with the utmost difficulty he keeps himself from rising to assist her, and that he restrains himself from begging her out loud not to take so much trouble on his account.

Gwendoline, who, having been the unrivalled belle of one whole season, is consequently well versed in all the first symptoms of the tender passion, marks his secret admiration and perplexity, and while outwardly calm and decorous, is inwardly merry with laughter. Dinner having come to a satisfactory close, she retires with a proper lack of haste, but once fairly in the hall rushes off to Georgie and throws herself into her arms.

‘Congratulate me, dearest. I have had a great success; I may safely say I have brought down the house—meaning John. He looked unutterable praises all through. And,’ mysteriously, ‘I have done more—I have made a *conquest*!’

‘No!’ says Georgie. ‘Not Mr. Hyde. They say he has a *penchant* for pretty——’

‘Wrong, my dear. Sir Hilary is my secret adorer! You say he has been abroad, in the East, for some time? Then depend upon it, Georgie, he has there imbibed some of their foreign notions, and will be here presently to make a bargain with you. I am sure he wants to *buy* me! Don’t take anything under a lac of rupees.’

‘You mean——’

‘I mean that he never took his eyes off me, and that he is undoubtedly hungry, poor man, because he ate no dinner, although I took the greatest care of him. Now Georgie, remember, don’t sell me too cheap. He will surely broach the matter to you before he leaves to-night.’

‘To-night—he won’t leave to-night,’ says Mrs. Wyndham, breaking into an irrepressible laugh, ‘he always *sleeps*; he will probably spend half to-morrow here, waiting for the mid-day train from Cahirmore. My dearest Gwen, what is to be done?’

‘Get me two good books, and I shall hide my diminished head in my chamber until he takes his departure. What an adventure it is, and what fun I have had! I shall always keep this dear little cap and this spotless apron in memory of it: once only was I on the point of giving way, and that was when John said, quite out loud (only happily no one was attending), “Thank you, *dear*.”’

‘And if Sir Hilary asks me at breakfast what has become of my lovely maid, what shall I say?’

‘That she is dead, or ill, or just gone out to be married to the butcher’s young man. Yes, that will be best, it will effectually quench all rising passion in his breast. Good Georgie, I must go; I fancied I heard a step—yes, “the foe, they come, they come.” Bring me a cup of tea presently to my lonely cell, and’—speaking rapidly from the doorway, preparatory to flight—‘I nearly forgot to tell you, darling, they had no theological discussion whatsoever; their discourse was anything but learned—they went in for gossip pure and simple, and entertained each other in the most genial fashion with the pleasantest and the raciest little anecdotes possible, all about their neighbours’ delinquencies!’

It is six months later, and the very height of the London season. To-night there is a ball at the Duchess of Glenliven’s, and as the old lady has a passion for beauty, even the very staircases and ante-rooms of her house are crowded with some of England’s loveliest and best.

The dreamy strains of the last new valse are sobbing and sighing through the rooms; the perfumed breath of countless flowers is making the air languid with its sweetness; afar off the distant splash of many fountains meets the ear; fans are swaying, eyes are brightening—glowing; smiles and soft speeches, coquettish glances and rippling laughter, are everywhere.

Here is the charming Mrs. Leighton, as usual faultlessly attired; there the lovely Mrs. Coppinger-Hall, the centre of an admiring throng; lower down is Lady Ecks; still lower the pretty, piquant Duchess of Zaid.

Here too is Lady Gwendoline Primrose, tall and fair, and perfect as Nature and her sister Art, combined, can make her. Her large violet eyes are dark and deep with the excitement of the hour, her red, ripe lips are parted in a bewitching smile, her chestnut hair is brushed back sleek and smooth

into a soft rich knot behind. Her lissome figure is clothed in white silk, softened with tulle, and decked here and there with trailing lilies: it is a very triumph of a gown, fresh from the hands of Elise.

Just now she is standing in the ball-room exactly opposite the chief entrance door, listening good-naturedly to a ponderous compliment, levelled at her dainty shell-pink ear by the devoted Heavy at her side; with a suspicion of coquetry she has lowered her eyes, and is pretending to examine minutely the delicate figures carved upon her fan, so that when Sir Hilary Tremaine enters the room—which he does at this moment—she fails to notice him.

Leaning lazily against the wall, he lets his glance rove carelessly over the occupants of the apartment. Lightly it travels, scarcely resting as it goes, until in the course of its voyage it reaches the smitten dragoon opposite; here it lingers a moment, as though amused, and then passes on to his companion—and then——

The eye-glass drops from Sir Hilary's eye. He is as one transfixed with amaze. He grows a shade paler, and sinks into a friendly seat placed in one of the corners.

'I am surely going mad,' he soliloquises, still with his gaze riveted upon the white-robed apparition at the other side of the room—'*raging* mad!—clean gone out of my senses! For six months I have been trying vainly to banish that face from my thoughts, and now—*here*—I see its counterpart in the flesh. A parlour-maid disporting herself at the Duchess of Glenlivon's! Oh, impossible! Yes, I am clearly on the verge of lunacy, and yet what an extraordinary likeness!'

Putting out his hand, he grasps the arm of a man standing near him.

'Brandrum,' asks he faintly, 'tell me, who is the—the young lady opposite—in white?'

'What a tone!' returns the man addressed, regarding him with the keenest pity. '*Epris* already, dear boy? It generally takes a little longer. You are the most flattering case I have known. That is Lady Gwendoline Primrose. Not to know *her* argues yourself unknown. She is our reigning beauty *par excellence*.'

'Lady Gwendoline Primrose!'

'Even so. Nothing like that in the East, I take it—eh? You seem moved. Have you so soon surrendered? I *wouldn't*, if I were you: you will only knock yourself up for the season

—give yourself a thoroughly bad “quarter of an hour”—and gain nothing by it. She has refused half a dozen good offers this year already, and driven Lady Rosemary almost to distraction by her caprices. Turn your eyes away, Tremaine; she is a Siren, a Circe.’

‘I *must* get an introduction,’ says Tremaine, who has not heard one word of all this well-meant warning.

‘Is it really so bad with you as all that?’ with a slightly contemptuous shrug. ‘Well—so be it. Afterwards, give me credit for good feeling. Lady Gwendoline and I are excellent friends at present, so I dare say I shall be able to manage it for you.’

He does manage it. A few minutes later Sir Hilary is standing before the Siren, and is being well received. The very faintest shadow of a start runs through her frame as her eyes meet his, the very slightest accession of colour dyes her cheeks; both are so undetermined that Tremaine, who is watching her narrowly, cannot be quite certain that either ever existed.

She is graciousness itself to him, and smiles sweetly.

‘Yes, he can have one dance, she has still one to spare.’ As she says this, she deftly draws her pencil across a name upon her card, and writes ‘Sir Hilary’ over it. ‘The next? yes, it is the next; odd, is it not?’—with a charmingly swift glance.

Then, the last fond notes of the valse having died away, she places her hand upon his arm, bestows a gentle inclination of her lovely head upon her late disconsolate partner, and suffers Tremaine to lead her away into one of the nearest conservatories.

When they have discussed, as in duty bound, the usual first ideas that always air themselves afresh on the following of every new acquaintance, Tremaine—who has been rather *distract* all through—comes to a dead pause.

So does Gwendoline. She lets her eyes read his puzzled face for a moment, and then returns once more to a rapt contemplation of the useful fan, while with difficulty she conceals the smile that curves the corners of her lips. She is fond of stage situations, and really this is better than any play.

Sir Hilary, finding the prolonged silence growing oppressive, rouses himself resolutely, and turns his face to hers. Then, impelled by an overpowering curiosity, he says to her somewhat abruptly—

‘Were you ever in Ireland?’

‘Yes’—indifferently—‘several times.’

‘Were you,’ with a certain amount of hesitation, ‘ever in a little village called Ballykillruddereen?’

‘Ballykillruddereen?’ with a soft laugh. ‘What a name! Must it not fatigue the poor Irish inventing such long ones? Is there really a place called Ballykillruddereen?’

‘There is. You were never there, then?’ Even he himself is surprised at his own persistency.

‘How oddly you ask the question,’ says Lady Gwendoline, playing with her fan, and refusing to meet his earnest gaze. ‘Do you suspect me of spending much of my time in rustic villages? Now, tell me candidly, *do* you think I look like a person who had been sojourning at Ballykill—what is it?’

‘No, you do not,’ replies he, with conviction; then he sighs involuntarily, and is silent.

‘What a heavy sigh,’ murmurs her ladyship mockingly; ‘there is quite three volumes in that one sigh alone. Did you lose your heart in that eccentric and very unpronounceable little Irish town?’

‘I?—oh no!’ with a start and a smile, ‘not quite that. But I met there once what I thought until to-night was quite the loveliest woman I ever saw. She’—an expressive pause—‘was very like *you*!’

‘Was she? Thank you, Sir Hilary’—with an amused laugh. ‘If there is one thing I admire it is a delicately-veiled compliment—such as yours. But to confess a secret to you, I am tired of being told how lovely I am. And so your Irish beauty was like me?’

‘I don’t know whether she was Irish or English—but she was *very* like you’—with a steady glance.

‘Who was she?’ colouring slightly.

‘I don’t know.’

‘What was her name?’

‘I can’t say; I never discovered.’

‘A fair Incognita, in fact. What a charming adventure! It reads like a Spanish plot. I hope my facsimile was at least a lady?’

Sir Hilary hesitates, and looks at the floor. It is an undeniably perfect floor, but can hardly be said to deserve the flattering attention bestowed upon it by Sir Hilary.

‘I give you my honour I don’t know that either,’ he says with an effort.

‘How stupid! —with a little shrug. ‘If I were a man, and had lost my heart as entirely as you have evidently lost yours to an unknown beauty, I should not rest until I had discovered every single thing about her.’

‘I did not say I had lost my heart to her.’

‘No?’ says Gwendoline, with lifted brows of disbelief. And then they drift into other topics, and the subject is not renewed.

Towards the close of the evening he manages to get another dance with her, and begins to feel miserably happy, if I may be allowed the expression. She is very sweet and kind, and lets him know indirectly she has thrown over two other men to give him his dances.

May he call to-morrow? Yes; she is sure mamma will be very glad to see him. Does he know mamma? No? Oh! then he must let her present him. When Lady Rosemary hears he has been in the East, and that he has met there dear Primrose (Primrose is the fortunate brother of this peerless sister), and that he has a wholesome horror of the Russians, she is sure he and mamma will be friends directly. She does so adore those poor dear Turks! All this in the friendliest way possible.

Presently he finds himself speaking to ‘mamma,’ who receives him very courteously and makes much of him. By this time the long-suffering Countess is well up in all the shades and variations of her daughter’s face and manner, and something in them to-night when she addresses Sir Hilary, something so slight as to be indescribable, makes eternal hope spring once more within her maternal breast. Tremaine, although now only a baronet, is heir to the earldom of an old and distant cousin, and will some day be one of the wealthiest young men in England. Yes, he is undoubtedly a better match than even the amiable though elderly Berlie; so the Countess is very nice to him, and tells him his mother was one of her dearest friends, and somehow gives him to understand, without saying it, that her house in town is open to him while she remains in it.

Sir Hilary gladly avails himself of this unspoken invitation, and the very next afternoon makes his way to the lucky Belgravian mansion that contains his lady-love; is admitted, and indistinctly petted.

These daily visits continue for a fortnight, during which time he goes through all the agonies of hope and fear, distrust

and belief, and yet 'dares not put it to the touch to win or lose' all he holds dearest on earth.

Lady Gwendoline is *exigeante, difficile*, very capricious, and much too civil to Lord George Millefleurs! Generally, when Tremaine arrives at the residence of the adored, he finds Lord George upon the doorsteps just departing, or when *he* is departing, finds him there just arriving. Occasionally the two young men meet in the drawing-room, and having expressed hypocritical joy at the *rencontre*, sit glowering at each other in civil nineteenth-century fashion throughout the interview, and try with dogged perseverance who will sit it out the longest. All of which is an inward joy to the spoiled beauty, who can calculate to a nicety every change of feeling in each breast.

To-day Sir Hilary, lounging dejectedly up the stairs, finds her happily alone; and instantly brightening up, sits down, and lays himself out to be agreeable.

'Mamma has a bad headache,' Gwendoline tells him, and hopes he will excuse her. She is almost *sure*—this plaintively, and with palpable hesitation, as though honestly believing she is imparting intelligence that will cause disappointment—almost sure Lady Rosemary will not be able to leave her room to-day. It is really very unfortunate, &c.

'I am very sorry,' says Tremaine untruthfully, and straightway banishes the Countess and her headache from his thoughts. He is in radiant spirits, and looks it. Lord George, he discovers presently, is out of town, so the morning is all his own. Gwendoline is in her sweetest humour, and for some time conversation flows briskly.

Then 'a change comes o'er the spirit of his dream.' The door opens and a footman advances noiselessly; he bears with him a marvel of a bouquet, composed of palest blossoms only, and presents it to Lady Gwendoline.

'With Lord George Millefleurs's compliments,' he says solemnly, and departs.

Sir Hilary relapses into eloquent silence; all his radiancy has deserted him, while in its place an expression half sullen, wholly miserable, has settled upon his countenance.

Lady Gwendoline has gone into raptures over her snowy bouquet.

'How delicious!' she says with a pleased smile. 'I do so love white flowers—it was quite too good of Lord George to remember that; but he is very thoughtful. And how sweet

they are, how fresh, like a little breath straight from the country. Are they not? See——’ Stooping forward, she holds the obnoxious bouquet with a charming grace right under his nose.

‘Very,’ returns he in a freezing tone, recoiling a little.

‘Don’t you *like* flowers?’ with innocent surprise.

‘*Some* flowers,’ in a marked tone.

‘Anything the matter with you, Sir Hilary?’ demands she with touching concern. ‘Do you know, you really *do* look very badly. Of late I have often noticed how fitful your spirits are at times. A minute ago you seemed quite cheerful, and *now*—— Is it toothache? neuralgia? Do tell me if I can help you in any way?’

‘You can,’ exclaims he rising, ‘if you will. I shall be cheerful again directly if you will only pitch those flowers out of the window!’

‘Throw my lovely flowers to the London *gamins*! Dear Sir Hilary, *why*?’

‘Because’—desperately, and getting as close to her as circumstances will permit, considering how she is hemmed in by a gipsy table, the fender, and the huge footstool on which her feet are resting—‘because—I *love* you! And to see you accept flowers from any man except myself renders me absolutely wretched. Gwendoline,’ stretching out his hand, ‘let me dispose of them for you.’

‘I will’—sweetly, ignoring the first part of his speech altogether. ‘Bring me over that Venetian vase on the cabinet, and I will let you arrange them with me. No? you won’t help me? How uncivil of you. Well, never mind then. I shall do them myself, and, just to let you see I bear no malice, I shall give you one whole flower all for yourself!’—holding one out to him.

‘No, thank you,’ icily.

‘Not when I give it to you?’ with arched brows of astonishment.

‘No, thank you,’ with increased coldness.

‘But indeed you *must* have it,’ says Beauty, her temper charmingly unruffled; and, as she always gains the day, he presently finds himself the richer by one detested sprig of stephanotis.

‘Now,’ exclaims she a few minutes later, having arranged the flowers to her satisfaction, ‘sit down over there, and put that ugly little frown in your pocket, and let us be pleasant.’

Tell me something more about that odd Irish village with the funny name, and your mysterious beauty.'

'I told you something a few moments ago of which you take no heed,' reproachfully.

'Did you?' blushing faintly. 'Are you sure? I thought you had been singularly stupid—taciturn, I mean—since your entrance. Perhaps I was not attending.'

'No,' bitterly, 'you were too much taken up with Millefleurs's offering.'

'Then suppose you tell it to me again now.'

'May I?' eagerly. 'Gwendoline, I told you I loved you.'

'Oh! Sir Hilary!' in tones of the liveliest reproach; 'what is it you are saying? *You!* who have given every atom of heart you possess into the keeping of that perplexing Irish maiden. No, it is no use your denying it—it is only too palpable.'

'Nonsense; I never spoke to her in my life.'

'Not once?'

'No. At least nothing I can remember.'

'Then she must have spoken to you, which—forgive me—was surely a little forward of her—the worst possible taste, I think. I do not believe she could have been a *very* nice girl. What did she say?'

'How could she speak to me when I tell you I did not speak to her?'

'Sir Hilary, don't prevaricate; that is not a straightforward answer to my question. Tell me what she said.'

'It was nothing to signify.'

'But it *does* signify, and I insist on knowing'—with an adorable pout.

'*Must* I tell?'

'You must,' imperiously.

'Well, then'—with the calmness of despair—'she said "*Champagne, sir?*"'

'She said—*what!*' rising slowly.

'"*Champagne, sir,*"' doggedly.

'Why, then, she must have been—she was—a——'

'Parlour-maid,' returns he, with all the desperate determination of a man who has made up his mind to say his worst and be done with it.

'And you have dared to compare *me* to a—parlour-maid!' says Gwendoline; and then she turns her back upon him, and walking over to the window leaves him standing on the

hearth-rug, in a frame of mind impossible to describe. His eyes are fixed miserably upon his offended idol, and as he looks he can see that a slight agitation shakes her slender frame. It may be grief—it may be anger—it *may* be laughter—who shall say what it is? Sir Hilary, feeling thoroughly unhappy, inclines towards the second belief.

‘Gwendoline, you are angry with me,’ he says, speaking from a respectful distance, but with all his heart in his tones.

‘I am,’ faintly; ‘and—you should not call me by my Christian name, without permission—I am not a parlour-maid!’

This is a cruel stab. Tremaine winces, but wisely refrains from speech.

‘She cannot have been like me, says Gwendoline presently, still in a subdued voice. ‘Do say she wasn’t.’

‘I can’t,’ despairingly, but still true to his colours, for which she secretly admires him. ‘I don’t know whether she was really a servant, or a princess in disguise. I only know she was the loveliest woman I ever saw, and that you and she are so alike, I should not know one from the other. But that you have led me to believe you have never been——’

‘I do not care to be like—that sort of person,’ interrupts she hastily.

‘If you had seen her you would forgive me’—softly—‘she was so beautiful—so sweet—so like yourself!’

Gwendoline smiles. Turning to him, she extends a forgiving hand.

‘As she was so lovely, I pardon you,’ she says graciously, and Tremaine, bending over the white fingers, presses upon them a grateful caress. Just before he takes his leave she says—

‘By-the-by, are you going to the theatricals at Mrs. Gore-Palliser’s next week?’

‘Are you?’ cautiously.

‘I am going to act. I have only got a minor part, but I should like you to come and give me some slight applause.’

‘I shall surely be there,’ with considerable warmth.

‘And, Sir Hilary,’ calling to him mischievously as he reaches the door, ‘you may bring a bouquet to throw at me; and, remember how I adore *white* flowers!’

When he is gone she raises her hands to her head, and falls into an attitude expressive of the deepest inward research.

‘I wonder,’ murmurs she anxiously, ‘where Hamper *could* have put that linen dress and that memorable cap and apron!’

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The curtain has risen; the guests are all seated; everyone is on the look-out for the first break-down. Mrs. Gore-Palliser, with her face wreathed in smiles, is secretly battling with a growing fear, and is in an agony of apprehension lest the eldest Miss Gore shall forget her part. All Miss Gore’s women-friends are in an agony lest she *shouldn’t*.

She does not, however, and the curtain falls upon a very successful first act in a drawing-room comedy. Universal applause follows; though Sir Hilary’s, who is disappointed at Gwendoline’s non-appearance, can scarcely be called animated.

Five minutes pass away. The music that fills up the interval has ceased. Fans grow once more silent as the second act commences. The heroine (Miss Gore) is in her dressing-room, looking almost handsome in a priceless morning robe. A gentle soliloquy follows; and then, from the wing, a maid, dressed in a quiet linen gown, a faultless cap, an irreproachable apron, glides slowly on to the stage.

Sir Hilary’s heart stops beating. He half rises from his seat—is it Mrs. Wyndham’s servant, or Lady Gwendoline Primrose? He grows very pale—his eyes meet hers—and then all at once he *knows*.

When the act is over and the curtain falls he leaves the room, and going through an outer apartment pushes his way into the impromptu green-room. Finding Gwendoline there, with a slightly embarrassed expression upon her usually *riante* face, he draws her unresistingly into an adjoining room, and deliberately shuts the door.

‘It was you, then, all through,’ his face white with agitation. ‘You were in Ireland the last time I was there. Oh! how I persecuted Wyndham about you, and went half mad because I could learn nothing. My darling, why did you not tell me before?’

‘Tell you what?’ withdrawing her hand with a rather nervous laugh. ‘That I have been to Ireland in my time? And pray, Sir Hilary, who gave you permission to call me your “darling”—you, a young man addicted to par——’

‘Do not jest *now*,’ entreatingly. ‘You were at Mrs.

Wyndham's last autumn. I cannot be mistaken. Is it not so ?'

'You are so positive I do not dare to contradict you.'

'But how was it ? It is the most amazing thing ! What induced you to take up such a part in real earnest ?'

'Mind, I do not commit myself, but I will suppose a case for you. Perhaps Georgie was in despair, because she had people coming to dinner and her own maid had deserted her ; perhaps she had a good friend, given to private theatricals, who undertook to save her from social extinction ; perhaps the good friend helped a certain gentleman to all she had of the best, and '—archly—' got cruelly stared at for her pains ! Oh ! Sir Hilary, how badly you *did* behave.'

Turning to a side-table, she takes up an open bottle of champagne, salver, and a glass, and having filled the latter, presents it to him in due form.

'Champagne, sir ?' she says demurely.

'How it recalls everything,' exclaims he. Then, in a properly matter-of-fact tone, taking the glass from her, he says, 'Thank you, I will drink—if you will allow me to pledge you.'

'Under what name ?' smiling. 'Jemima Jane, or Lady Gwendoline Primrose ?'

'Neither.' He has grown very grave, and somewhat pale and anxious. Touching the wine with his lips he says, 'I here pledge the future Lady Tremaine !'

Gwendoline blushes generously, and involuntarily moves a few steps from him ; and yet in spite of her evident emotion, a slight smile still hovers round her lips.

'Are you sure you know to whom you are proposing ?' she says, with an attempt at her old *insouciance*. 'Without this cap and apron I shall cease to be the heroine of Ballykillraddereen. Is it Mrs. Wyndham's maid you love, or indeed myself ?'

'How can I tell ? They are both so blended in my brain. For the future (for *your* sake), all parlour-maids shall be precious in my sight.'

'Oh, no, I *hope* not,' says Gwendoline. Then, very softly, and with a charming smile, 'Think how jealous, how *wretched*, that would make me.'

'Then you accept me—you do, indeed, love me ?' exclaims he eagerly, slipping his arm round her ; and Gwendoline, with a glance, half shy, half tender, lays her hand in his.

‘KRIN.’

Out of the blazing summer sunshine into the cool room comes Krin, with her waving masses of chestnut hair as untidy as usual, her lips warm and parted. Her muslin dress of pale azure is slightly crumpled, while two dark stains, that shine conspicuously upon it, betray her visit to the strawberry-bed.

‘Corinna, my dear?’ protests her mother, perfectly aghast at her appearance.

‘Yes, darling?’ says Krin interrogatively, and glances suspiciously up and down her attire until she too descries the fatal marks, when she blushes the daintiest crimson.

‘Where have you been?’ Mrs. Crofton goes on when she has recovered breath, ‘and what have you been doing? Your hair is all over your head, and your dress—— But let me introduce you to your cousin, Lord Rowden, who has come to spend a few days with us.’

Phœbus Apollo has been making free with Krin’s adorable eyes to such an extent that up to this the drawing-room has appeared to her immersed in semi-darkness, and she has remained totally unaware of the stranger’s presence. Now indeed, with a faint start, she turns, and, peering through the imaginary mist, sees him standing on the hearth-rug, regarding her with amused scrutiny. He is a tall, fair young man, decidedly good-looking, with but a very slight tinge of the fashionable boredom about his face and figure. He has large indolent grey eyes, a steady mouth and chin, and an irreproachable brown moustache. He has been watching Krin’s entrance and general deportment with languid interest up to the present moment, but now comes forward with something like eagerness in his manner to receive the hand she shyly offers him.

He is about to speak to her when Rhoda’s voice, sweet and

rippling, rings in between them; their hands part, and Corinna falls back a step or two.

'Corinna,' says Rhoda, mild wonderment in her tone, 'where have you been, dear? Your hair is utterly wild, and untidy hair is so unbecoming to you.'

Krin blushes—such a sudden sweet transition of colour as it is—and puts both hands to her head in a vain endeavour to subdue the refractory locks. With her arms so raised, and the startled half-ashamed expression on her face, it occurs forcibly to Saxon how more than pretty she is.

'I often think,' he says in his slow quiet way, 'how much more comfortable and—and natural a woman must feel when her hair defies fashion, and falls into disgrace. I have rather a fancy for rebellious hair myself.'

Corinna, sinking into a chair, smiles involuntarily, and looks pleased. Rhoda smiles too, but does *not* look pleased.

'Have you?' she says mildly. 'I think eventually you would tire of it. It may be becoming to some styles, but——'

'I think it is becoming to Corinna, says Lord Rowden, still slowly, and in a tone that but for its calmness might be obstinate.

'Well, perhaps so,' returns Rhoda critically; 'it certainly softens her face, and—ah—how do you think the Hall looks, Saxon?'

'I can hardly judge as yet. I got but a bare glimpse at it this morning, still it struck me as being considerably out of repair—that is, great parts of it. It should have been more closely looked after, but my uncle was always careless. It appeared to me gloomy, too, and dark, almost unwholesome. Now *this* place, Mrs. Crofton, is so infinitely more cheerful in every way.'

'Moorlands is the prettiest place, perhaps,' says Mrs. Crofton complacently, 'if you can put a very ordinary house in comparison with a castle; but then we have no grounds worth mentioning. Rowden Hall ought to be the leading place in the county, Saxon. I should think a very little trouble would set it to rights.'

'I wish you would try and help me,' says Saxon suddenly. 'If you would all come, and look it over, and suggest—a woman has so much better taste than a man.'

'We shall be delighted,' says Rhoda prettily. 'I have often longed to see the Hall, and now my wish will be gratified.'

'I have been all through it,' declares Corinna, speaking almost for the first time, 'over and over again.'

'Have you really?' exclaims Saxon with awakened interest, turning towards the window where she sits half hidden; 'do you mean to tell me you ever cared to enter the dull old place?'

'It is not dull to me. I love it. Old Simon and I are fast friends, and many hours have he and I passed together in the picture-gallery. I think I could tell you now the histories of every one of your ancestors.'

'You are fond of pictures?' asks her cousin, thinking in his own mind what a charming picture she herself is making at the present moment, with her ruffled hair and large short-seeing eyes, and muslin dress and strawberry stains, and all.

'Very—especially of old portraits. They seem to speak to me. Of all in your gallery I like little sad-eyed Millicent Rowden the best.'

'I never knew of these expeditions of yours, Corinna,' says Mrs. Crofton. 'I don't know that you had any right to go there, my dear. The house was not open to any one. I fear, Saxon, she has been taking rather a liberty with you in your absence.'

'A *liberty*!' repeats the young man warmly; 'nay, rather she has done me an honour. I shall like the old place better now I can imagine her form flitting through it. How like a ghost you must have looked, Corinna, moving through the closely-shuttered rooms, with only here and there a fleck of light to guide the way, and with so old a servitor behind. Were you not afraid some ghosts more real would rise to challenge your approach?'

'I am not nervous,' says Corinna, with a slight shake of her head, and a shadowy gleaming smile.

A week, a fortnight, three weeks pass away, and still the slight repairs going on at the Hall do not complete themselves, or else Lord Rowden feels no disposition to quit his aunt's comfortable quarters.

Day after day he lingers, as though unwilling to tear himself away; and into the heart of the Hon. Alicia Crofton has entered the delicious thought that time alone is required to see her handsome Rhoda installed mistress of Rowden Hall. This arrangement would be in every way desirable, as though the income attached to Moorlands is sufficient to enable the family to keep up a showy establishment and every outward

appearance of wealth, still it barely covers the yearly expenses, and leaves nothing wherewith to carry on a London campaign, or even a visit to those fashionable watering-places which eligibles are supposed to haunt.

The girls therefore have nothing but their faces to depend on, and such chances as the neighbourhood may afford, and certainly their Cousin Rowden is by far the richest *parti* that has as yet come amongst them. Mrs. Crofton, seeing all this with painful distinctness, yet, like the wise mother that she is, contents herself with watching the battle from afar, and shows no inclination to interfere or assist matters in any way, beyond encouraging Saxon to make his stay with them last as long as possible.

Meantime July is drawing to a close, such a warm oppressively-sultry July as has not been felt for many a year; and as the clock strikes four on one memorable afternoon Saxon strolls into the drawing-room at Moorlands.

'I think I will go up and see how they are getting on above,' he says, indicating his own home by a lazy movement of the head. 'I have not been there for some days now, and they want rousing.'

'Then ride, my dear Saxon,' says Mrs. Crofton; 'the heat is intolerable.'

'No, I shall walk. It is barely two miles from this, and wood for the most part. Oh, for frost and snow!' says Saxon smiling, and raising both arms indolently until his hands reach the back of his head. 'Rhoda, how do you keep so provokingly cool?'

'I don't know,' answers Rhoda sweetly; 'by keeping quiet I suppose. If, instead of going for this long stupid walk, you would come and sit here in this shady room, you would soon learn the secret.'

But Saxon will not see the pretty invitation.

'I am too restless a being for such charming repose,' he says; 'I must be always up and doing, and conscience tells me I should look more closely after my affairs. Good-bye, Rhoda, keep me in your memory while I am absent from you.'

'I will try,' murmurs Rhoda tenderly, and with a friendly nod my lord departs.

He has not been gone five minutes when Krin enters the room, bright and animated.

'Mamma, have you seen the peaches lately?'

'No, dear.'

'Then I can tell you they are really splendid. I have just been examining them, and they are *such* a size! I think MacDonnell is the best gardener we have ever had—don't you?'

'Yes, dear,' sleepily.

'And the grapes, they will soon be ready for table. I could hardly keep my hands off them to-day; such a sweet delicate perfume too as they have spread all over the house!'

'How you do run on,' says Rhoda pettishly, 'and the day so warm too! Do you never tire, I wonder—do you never feel used-up, or languid?'

'Never,' answers Krin with a gay laugh.

'Then I think it would be all the better if you did. A little languor would be preferable to the hoydenish manner you affect. There is *nothing* so unpleasant as too great an exhibition of health in a woman.'

'You will exhaust yourself if you say much more,' says Miss Krin demurely; 'mamma, will you come out with me?'

'No, my dear, it is too warm; and now Saxon is safely out of the way, I think I shall enjoy a little doze.'

'Where has Saxon gone?'

'To the Hall, to see how the work there is progressing.'

'Oh! I shall take a book and sit in the verandah then, it will be cooler there.'

So saying she once more seizes the hat she has discarded, and, arming herself with a volume, retires from the room. Running down the stairs with her usual impetuosity, she almost precipitates herself into Saxon's arms, who, to her surprise, she finds standing on the lowest step.

'You here?' she cries. 'Why, I thought you were at Rowden by this time.'

'I got as far as your entrance gate, when I repented myself and came back for something—guess what it was.'

'Your pipe?'

'No, *you*. It is a delicious walk, and the sun is going down. We can go almost the entire way through the woods, so put on your hat and come.'

Krin puts down her book without a word, adjusts her hat, and cheerfully prepares to follow him. So, together, they pass out into the glowing golden sunshine, and taking the side avenue escape the drawing-room windows, and are soon out of sight—and alone,

Through the hot parched grass, across a flowery lane, over a stile they go, into the deep green woods. Their words are very few, but they saunter on contentedly side by side, and when the stile has been crossed, Saxon retains her hand in his, so that palm to palm they continue their way. Yet it cannot be said that he is making love to her, as he does not so much as press the hand he holds, only keeping it always in the same firm clasp; while Krin is conscious of nothing but that it is a blissful summer's afternoon, and that in the sky above her not even one faintest leaden streak dims the deep exquisite blue.

Before them, half hidden by the giant trees, rises a tower, old and ivy-clad.

'That tower has always had a fascination for me,' says Krin, stopping suddenly to regard the old pile before her. 'Who built it, and how long ago?'

'Oh, hundreds of years, possibly.'

'It must have been uncomfortable as a residence at the best of times, with all those great open slits for windows, through which the wind must whistle. What is inside it, I wonder?'

'Dust and spiders, I should say. Some day we will get the key from old Simon, and reconnoitre. By-the-by, talk of somebody—here *is* old Simon. Simon, have you the key of this place about you?'

'Ay, master—my lord—I allus carries it here,' returns old Simon, diving into one of his numerous pockets, and producing a huge key, that is almost bright from constant friction. 'Will you be long here, master, my lord?' he goes on wistfully, as he hands the key to Saxon, 'I was on my way home, and——'

'Then continue it,' says his master kindly; 'I will keep the key until we meet again. Do not let me delay you.'

'I shall be up at the house again to-night wi' a message; mayhap if you're going there you would leave it wi' Mrs. Mason for me,' says Simon, as though anxious to regain the treasure he is parting with for so short a time.

'I will,' says Saxon, and with mumbled thanks the old man shambles off through the woods towards his cottage, where his ancient dame is faithfully awaiting him.

Rowden, turning the key in the massive lock, the tower door swings easily backwards, and they enter. Within all is dark and gloomy, though a few threads of light stream down

from the openings above, and there is not so much dust nor as many spiders as they had imagined.

‘Ugh! how dreary,’ shivers Krin; and together they ascend the narrow winding stairs that lead into the only other room the tower contains—a bare desolate apartment, void of all furniture beyond a stone bench that comes out a fixture from the wall.

‘I confess I am disappointed,’ says Krin laughing. ‘Now for what purpose was it built?’

‘I hardly know; not as a watch-tower certainly, as it does not rise sufficiently high to betray the approach of foes. I suppose they must have thought it would look picturesque amongst the trees.’

‘I should like to put in windows, and oak chairs, and tables,’ says Krin reflectively; ‘it would be a charming place for tea in the summer, and——’ A loud noise, followed by a decided click, interrupts her speech. ‘What is that?’ she murmurs faintly, alarmed.

‘The door closing, I think.’

‘Oh, is that all? How loud it sounded! Come, the place is uncanny, let us go on to the house.’

But Saxon’s face is slightly clouded.

‘I hope the lock has not shot into its place,’ he says uneasily; ‘it has that trick I know, though I forgot all about it until now.’

‘Nonsense, do not let us imagine evil,’ Krin exclaims nervously, running down the stone steps, while he quickly follows her. But when they reach the door they find it fastened and locked against them beyond all doubt—the key being on the outside.

‘Now what is to be done, I should like to know?’ asks Krin, with a white face and frightened eyes; ‘how are we to get out?’

‘I don’t know,’ says Saxon, and then, the absurdity of the situation striking him, he bursts into laughter, sudden and irrepressible. For a moment Krin disapproves this line of conduct, but presently—being young, and her own laughter ever near—she too gives in and joins heartily in his merriment, forgetful of the awful consequences. What will mamma say when they arrive late for dinner? How will proper Rhoda look?

‘Of course somebody will come directly to let us out,’ she says, with conviction in her tone.

'Of course. You remember old Simon said he would be back here again to-night, and night with him meant early evening without doubt.'

'Then let us go upstairs again, and wait for him above. It is so dismal here.'

But waiting does not bring him. An hour passes slowly away. The shadows grow longer and longer.

'What o'clock is it now?' asks Krin in a low tone, and for the hundredth time Saxon examines his watch.

'A quarter to seven,' he answers reluctantly.

'Oh!' moans Krin in a voice of anguish, 'are we *never* to be released? How shall I ever face mamma and Rhoda? I wish I had never seen this hateful tower—*why* did you induce me to enter it?'

The accusation conveyed in this speech is so unjust that for the moment Saxon is silent.

'How can you say *I* induced you, Corinna?' he says gravely, when he has recovered himself. 'Did you not tell me you were most anxious to see the inside? When you said *that*, what could I do but show it to you?'

'Nevertheless it is all your fault; but for you I would not be here now.'

'But for Simon, you mean, and your own desire.'

'It was *you* opened the door,' she insists pettishly, looking all the time like a beautiful spoiled child as she sits on the old stone bench, her head turned petulantly from his gaze, her eyes watching through one of the openings in the wall for any chance passer-by. 'Of course when you did so, I went in—who could have done otherwise? But there, where is the use of losing your temper about it? I am in a dreadful scrape, and I shall never be forgiven, that is all.'

'You need not make matters worse than they are,' says Rowden gloomily; 'you cannot be more upset about the whole affair than I am. But'—going over to one of the windows and staring down—'even if I jumped out it would do you no good. The fall would certainly stun me, if it did no worse; and to have me lying insensible out there would not help matters in the least.'

'Do you suppose I want you to *kill* yourself?' says Krin half frightened; and again silence falls between them.

Half-past seven. Half-past eight. The long summer's evening is drawing to a close at last; it is growing positively dark. For the last hour not one word has been spoken by

either of them. This slow torture has proved too much for Saxon. For the past ten minutes he has been revolving a wild idea in his brain, and with it before him is fast losing sight of all common sense.

Not far from one of the open spaces in the wall that represent windows there stretches sideways the branch of a tree, sufficiently stout, indeed, should he be happy enough to reach it in a spring, to support his weight, but the chances are that he will *not* reach it. It is a terrible risk to run—a risk in which failure means a severe accident, if not instantaneous death; but to Saxon's overwrought feelings it appears preferable that he should suffer from some broken bones, than that Krin should have to endure all the bitter reproaches that will be surely heaped upon her if they be discovered in their unsought imprisonment. Perhaps, too, even if he did come to the ground, he might not altogether lose consciousness; and if he could only manage to crawl to the door, and turn that unlucky key, all might yet be well. It has grown so late by this time that he has lost all hope of seeing anyone come to the rescue; if matters be allowed to continue as they now are, it is more than probable they will have to spend the night in this detested tower, and that is not to be thought of for a moment; so—

'Saxon,' cries Krin suddenly, rising to her feet, 'why don't you speak? I shall go mad if this goes on much longer. Have you no plan, no idea? Oh, do *something* to get us out of this place!'

She lays her hand upon his arm, and raises her face imploringly to his. As he returns her gaze he sees two large miserable tears rise in her eyes, and roll slowly down her pale cheeks. They pierce through Saxon's very heart.

'Krin, Krin, don't do that!' he exclaims hurriedly. 'I can, I *will* do something, but do not unnerve me. Forgive me before I go, child, for making you so unhappy.'

'"*Go*,"' whispers Krin, shrinking from him, 'go *where*?'

'Look, it is quite simple,' he says, leading her to the window, and pointing to the sturdy branch; 'I shall spring from here and catch that (I wonder I did not think of it before). I shall then descend, open the door for you, and set the bird free.'

He speaks lightly and presses her hand to reassure her. But she is not to be so deceived.

'Oh, no, no!' she gasps, trying with both hands to draw

him from the window. 'It is not to be thought of. No one could do it. It would be certain death. You *shall* not go.'

'Nonsense, Krin, do not be foolish. I tell you I can and will do it. Come, look up, and wish me luck; in five minutes I shall have you laughing at your fears. Now go away from the window, and wait over there for me.'

For a moment he hesitates, then, taking her face in both his hands, kisses her gently. A little later he is standing on the stone parapet that projects from the wall. There is a faint pause, followed by a slight rushing noise through the still air, a crackling of wood, and Krin, shuddering and half-fainting, sinks back upon the friendly bench.

Is it five hours, or five minutes, or a lifetime? Saxon's voice rings suddenly in her ears, as though sounding through deep water; and, looking up, she finds him bending anxiously over her.

'You silly child,' he says cheerfully, 'I do believe you fainted. Are you better now? Come, the air will do you good, and we can make our escape at last.'

He laughs, and, passing his arm round her, raises her to her feet. Mechanically she follows him to the top of the stairs, but there, even through the falling darkness, a deep red stain upon his hand attracts her notice.

'What is that?' she asks nervously, stopping short, 'is it *blood*? Oh, Saxon, you are hurt!' and this, added to all the previous excitement, overcoming her, she hides her face in her hands, and bursts into a passion of tears.

'Corinna,' says Saxon quietly, although his pulses are throbbing somewhat wildly, 'I declare I am ashamed of you. I thought you quite a plucky little girl, and see, a mere scratch upsets you. Why, your own toy penknife could give as severe a cut. I assure you I don't even feel it. Come, remember how late it is.'

He feels a great desire to take her in his arms, and kiss away the tender tears she is shedding for him, but some inward thought and something in the time and place prevent him. Although he did press his lips to hers before attempting the dangerous feat that, but for his being fortunate enough to reach the tree, might have resulted in his death, still, now that danger is at an end, he shrinks from doing anything that might bring a blush, however innocent, to her cheek.

The walk home is a very miserable one for Krin. All through the woods and fields she is haunted by the knowledge

of what is before her, and visions of her mother's wrath, mingled with Rhoda's censures, uttered in the clear ladylike staccato she knows so well, rise up to torture her. When they reach the balcony that runs by the drawing-room windows they pause to look in and see who are the occupants of the room. The lamps are burning brightly, and at the farthest end sits Rhoda peacefully reading. Mrs. Crofton also has a book before her, but her eyes do not rest upon it; her face is extremely pale, and there is an anxious terrified expression about it that speaks of unknown fears. Every now and then she glances at the door, as though expecting some one.

'Shall I go in first?' whispers Saxon, as he sees his companion's face of woe.

'Oh, no, no! I would far rather go in alone. It will be better,' says Krin, who feels there is unpleasantness in store for her, and cannot bear that he should witness her disgrace. So they leave the balcony, and, reaching the hall-door, which they find open, Corinna enters the house alone.

As she opens the drawing-room door, Mrs. Crofton looks up quickly, and, seeing Krin, draws a deep breath of relief. Then fear having abandoned her heart, womanlike she permits anger to enter it.

'Where have you been, Corinna?' she cries, rising. 'What do you mean by frightening us all to death like this? Do you know it is nearly ten o'clock? With whom have you been?'

'With Saxon,' returns Corinna fearfully.

'*What?*' says Rhoda, with flashing eyes, her voice a little shrill.

'With Saxon. We did not mean it—we did not know. We went into the old tower, only for a moment, but the door closed behind us, and we could not get out until Saxon flung himself from the window.' She pauses breathless.

'Very nice, upon my word,' says Rhoda, her tone a little shriller; 'a charming story indeed. Locked up with Lord Rowden in an old ruin, until ten o'clock. I wonder what the county will say!'

'We could not help it,' says Krin, looking at her mother with imploring eyes; 'it was nobody's fault; we would have been there *now* but for Saxon.'

'And pray, if it was so easy to leap from the window, why was it not done sooner?'

'But it was *not* easy. He might have killed himself;

and we hoped until the last that some one would come to release us. Mamma, why don't you speak to me ?'

'It is most unfortunate,' says Mrs. Crofton fretfully, 'I don't know, I am sure, what is to be done. All the servants of course know of it, and Thompson has been out looking for you for the last two hours. It will be known far and near.'

'It is more than unfortunate, it is disgraceful!' declares Rhoda. 'From the beginning I have noticed your artful endeavours to entrap Saxon, but this is indeed the climax. You will not win your game, however, let me tell you *that*. No *gentleman* was ever yet gained by immodest and forward behaviour.'

'"Immodest!" Mamma, do you hear that?—do you hear what she says?' cries poor Krin, paling and trembling beneath the chandelier. 'I tell you it was a mistake—it could not be helped. Mamma, speak to me.'

'You had better go to your room, Corinna, while I try and think calmly of this unhappy business,' says her mother coldly, though in her heart of hearts she does not condemn her.

Krin, with quivering lips, and one small shaking hand laid upon her bosom, turns, and makes her way, not to her room, but into the still night air. What has she done? What horrible things have been said to her. Can Saxon think as they do? *Has* she been immodest—forward? How unjust, how unbearable it all is! Oh! what shall she do? For the second time this evening she breaks into a storm of tears.

Somebody lays his hand upon her arm.

'Darling, have they been so very bad to you?' says Saxon's low caressing voice.

Krin's effort to reply is lost amid her sobs.

'You should have let me face them first. What did they say to you?'

'Oh, nothing—that is, nothing in particular. Of course mamma was very angry; she was frightened too, and she said so. That is all.'

'I am sure something more than that must have been said to make you cry so bitterly. Tell me, Corinna; I have the right to know. What did your mother say?'

'It wasn't mamma. It was Rhoda.'

'Oh!' says Saxon angrily, and then he mentions Rhoda's name, and puts a word before it that is not complimentary to Rhoda. 'Don't cry like that,' he goes on presently in a very tender tone, putting his arm round her, and pressing her head

down upon his breast; 'don't, my pet, you are making me awfully unhappy. Corinna, be sensible, darling, and listen to what I am going to say. I want to ask you a question.'

'What question?' very drearily.

'I could not ask it if you speak in that tone. Oh, Krin, can you not *guess* what it is I want to say? I love you, darling, with all my heart; I want to hear that you love me too.'

Krin raises her head, and makes a desperate effort to escape; but he holds her fast, and continues rapidly:

'Listen to me, Krin. It maddens me to see you made miserable, as you are now—I cannot bear it. Give me the right to look upon you as my promised wife, and I will protect you against the world. No one shall dare to say a cruel word to you. Sometimes—I don't know why—but sometimes I have thought of late that you—*care* for me. Oh, love, do not tell me I am presumptuous.'

There is no answer to this tender appeal, but he fancies (is it fancy?) that she nestles a little closer to him. He tightens his arms around her, and whispers softly—

'Say one word, Corinna—only *one*, to make me happy.'

But Corinna is a woman, and finds it impossible to express herself in so compact a form.

'Are *you* quite sure that *you* love *me*?' she asks with anxious emphasis, lifting her eyes to his for a moment.

'Quite sure. Must you ask that, darling? Don't you *know* it? There is nothing in this wide world I would compare with you.'

'That is how I feel towards you,' says Krin innocently, with a little contented sigh.

It is needless to relate what follows. Every one possessed of even a grain of sentiment will understand for themselves. Of course they are perfectly happy, and of course Corinna sheds a few more tears. They are the last she weeps for many, many months.

'Come,' says Saxon, with a laugh, 'if you cry any more I shall think you are regretting your decision. You must stop now, or I sha'n't answer for the consequences. It is very hard lines, both for me and my coat. I might as well be under a shower-bath. If it continues I shall certainly catch cold, and be laid up with severe influenza.'

Krin laughs too, though rather hysterically, and Saxon, putting his hand under her chin, turns her face up to his.

'You are better now,' he says, 'so we will go in together, and make our peace with your mother.'

Hand in hand they enter the drawing-room, and find the atmosphere decidedly cloudy. For the first time in her life Mrs. Crofton regards her kinsman with unsmiling eyes.

'Oh, Saxon, you have returned,' she says coldly.

'Yes, I have returned to ask a great favour of you. The greatest favour you can bestow.'

'A favour of *me*?' with considerable dignity, while Rhoda in the background comprehends fully, and whitens with rage and disappointment.

'Yes, indeed, so great that I hardly know *how* to ask it.' He quits Krin's side, and, going to her mother, takes her unresisting hand eagerly. 'Mrs. Crofton, will you make me a present of Corinna?'

There is a short pause, during which Mrs. Crofton draws breath, and reviews the position. How utterly mistaken she has been all along. Well, if not Rhoda, it is at least Corinna. If blind to the charms of one daughter, it is because he is so infatuated by the graces of the other. The fact that he will be her son-in-law remains undisturbed, and if Mrs. Crofton bears a deeper affection for one of her children, it is undoubtedly for Corinna.

'You amaze me! I had no idea of this,' she says at length with perfect truthfulness. 'I hardly know what to say, Saxon, but I hope with all my heart you will both be happy.' Her voice falters a little, and she holds out her disengaged hand to Krin. The girl, coming quickly to her side, throws her arms round her neck, and kisses her warmly.

'You are not a bit angry now, mamma, are you?' she asks with a bright sunny smile.

'I suppose I must forgive you now,' returns her mother, tapping her cheek; 'but you are a pair of naughty children, and succeeded in terrifying me more than I care to remember. Saxon, may I beg you will avoid that tower for the future—at all events until this wild girl belongs to you entirely.'

'I will get a new lock put on to-morrow,' says Saxon, and then he turns to Rhoda. 'Now *you* must wish us joy,' he exclaims cheerfully.

'I do, most sincerely. I wish you joy—of each other,' replies Rhoda, with the faintest possible pause. 'Of course I saw from the very first how it would end, so I cannot imitate mamma's surprise.'

There is a certain flavour about this speech that, to say the least of it, is unpleasant. Every one seems to think it will be wisdom to refrain from addressing her again.

'Corinna, you are looking very pale,' says her mother hastily; 'all the excitement and fatigue has been too much for you. Bid us good-night, dear, and go to bed.'

'Good-night,' says Krin obediently; and as Saxon follows her into the hall under pretence of getting her a candle, he whispers fondly, 'Are you perfectly happy now, Corinna?' But Corinna does not get time to answer that question—in words.

BEATRIX.

‘For stony limits cannot hold love out.’

Romeo and Juliet.

‘If it is those social nuisances called Tableaux Vivants you are about to discuss, I think it is high time for me to abscond,’ said Curzon, raising himself indolently from his stooping position. His mother’s lap-dog lay before the blazing fire, dozing under the influence of its grateful warmth, and his mother’s son had been employing himself idly for the last ten minutes in making the doze as unpleasant as it well could be.

‘Well, if you *are* going, go at once,’ Felicia exclaimed, raising her handsome, impatient blue eyes from the written list she was studying. ‘Certainly, in any affair of this kind, Curzon, your absence is generally an intense relief.’

‘Thank you ; your words are ever tipped with honey, especially when addressed to me,’ her cousin answered, as he lounged lazily towards the door, his hands thrust into the pockets of his morning coat. Arrived there, he paused irresolutely. ‘If you would like to make any use of me, you know, you *can*,’ he remarked, with rather grand condescension. ‘It is only the everlasting suggestions and counter-plottings I object to. Shall I be “Douglas” to your “Annie Laurie,” eh?’

‘Can’t,’ Felicia answered, growing faintly pink. ‘Captain Dudley has chosen that part.’

‘I wouldn’t doubt him,’ said Curzon, without the faintest spark of interest animating his voice. ‘He was always an interfering individual. Well, then, may I be “Hugh” to Miss Trixie’s “Dolly Varden”?’

‘Late again,’ Beatrix exclaimed, in her clear, musical voice, coming out of her corner with a pretty show of excite-

ment. 'You should have asked me all these important questions before. Frank Warburton has begged to attend me on this occasion, and you can fancy what a very magnificent Hugh *he* will make.'

Curzon leant against the side of the door, and regarded her curiously for a moment.

'Magnificent indeed!' he said slowly, 'with his beautiful masses of crimson hair and his gigantic, ill-shaped limbs. Is this interesting "Hugh" to hold you in his arms?'

'Won't it be capital fun!' exclaimed Beatrix, with a laugh of irrepressible amusement. 'It is that scene where "Hugh" runs away with "Dolly," you know. Frank wanted, right or wrong, to run away with *me*, too; but Felicia and I thought it would scarcely answer—off the stage, I mean, of course,' concluded Miss Falkland mischievously.

'Let me see,' Felicia broke in abstractedly, running her white finger up and down the list; '"Mary of Scotland," "Court of Queen Anne," "Betsy Prig," "Cin-der"—oh, *here* is a scene not yet settled; your picture of "The Huguenots," you remember, Beatrix. I suppose you can be the man there if you wish it, Curzon?'

'I *do* wish it,' Curzon said, hurriedly for him; 'that is, if Miss Falkland will have me.'

'Very good; I do not mind. But you will have to look your very best, you know, as I cannot have my picture spoiled,' Beatrix returned carelessly. And, having promised to look unspeakably handsome, Curzon left them to their own devices.

Felicia Rawdon and Curzon—Lord Stainer—were engaged to be married, and had been so ever since her sixteenth birthday; and she was now in her twenty-second year. They were cousins, and, being both young, rich, and handsome, everybody came to the satisfactory conclusion that a marriage was the most correct thing that could be arranged between them. As to the young couple themselves, it cannot be said that they were unwilling or in any wise indisposed towards each other. Curzon—five years his cousin's senior—had some vague ideas about matrimony, principally to the effect that *some*time in the course of his existence it would be necessary for him to get a mistress for his house, to settle down, to take an interest in farming, and so become a respectable member of society; and Felicia, being tall, stately, and fair-haired, seemed to his careless eyes to be the properest person going to meet these

far-off designs. Miss Rawdon herself was far too well bred and well educated to have any idea or will of her own on such a subject at sixteen, beyond the expressed wills of her guardians, one of whom was Lady Stainer, her aunt and Curzon's mother.

The consequence would have been a marriage in this instance, I have no doubt, but for two things that happened almost simultaneously. Felicia Rawdon went to London about a year before my story opens, and met there a certain Captain Dudley, of the Dragoon Guards, who suddenly and most opportunely recollected that he had cousins residing somewhere in the vicinity of Stainer Park; and Beatrix Falkland came to live with her aunt, Miss Dorothy, at Fenton.

Beatrix Falkland differed from Felicia Rawdon in every possible way under the sun. She was small, dark, piquante, and wonderfully restless. Her education had been carried on in France, from which country—having attained her eighteenth year—she had come to Fenton to take her aunt's and everybody else's heart by storm. Even Miss Rawdon, in her usual grand manner, adopted the little gipsy on the spot as her own especial friend; while Lady Stainer, secure in her son's engagement to Felicia, made much of the girl who was doomed to ruin all her hopes and plans.

I am ashamed to have to confess it of my heroine, but Miss Trixie, as she was generally called, was a flirt. She danced, laughed, and sang indiscriminately with all her admirers. I have seen her myself, at a garden-party given by my Lady Stanbury, bestow the half of a pretty piece of forget-me-not on young Warburton, with a slyly-worded promise to reserve the other half as sacred to herself for evermore; and scarcely fifteen minutes afterwards I beheld, to my utter astonishment, being old-fashioned and holding ancient opinions upon certain subjects, that very self-same treasured flower adorning the coat of George Weston of The Grange. I remember trying to feel angry with her upon that occasion, and failing miserably, the child having a way of her own that was perfectly irresistible.

She was gay, fanciful, mischievous, which, of course, was the very reason that Curzon, being an extremely sweet-tempered, well-bred, indolent young man, fell head over ears in love with her. This he did with his eyes open, of his own free will, as Beatrix gave him no encouragement whatever to

break his troth, being thoroughly aware of his engagement to Felicia Rawdon.

Miss Dorothy Falkland was tall, slender, aristocratic, and had attained her sixtieth year. She prided herself on her birth, her exquisite hands and feet, and her unapproachable French fowl. She had eyes of the sweetest, darkest grey, with magnificent soft white hair, a kindly, well-bred old face, and a carriage that would have sent any posture-master into agonies of delight. Such was Miss Dorothy Falkland; and a more attractive old lady it would have been impossible to meet with.

The Stainer Tableaux were a very great success, everybody being charmed with the novelty of the arrangements. Even old Lady Stanbury, who was generally acknowledged to be the most uncompromising of sneerers and scandalmongers—in fact, a modern female Thersites—an Egyptian mummy at all the feasts in the neighbourhood—was pleased on this occasion to compliment Lady Stainer openly on the extreme beauty both of the performers and their dresses, until Mrs. Blount of the Hall, who was within hearing, was ready to die of envy—which, perhaps, was the very reason why her ladyship did it.

The theatricals were succeeded by a ball, and all the performers had rooms assigned them at Stainers, where they retired, once their parts were ended for the night, to array themselves in modern evening costume for the remainder of the entertainment. Miss Falkland, having dressed herself to her own entire satisfaction, with the help of Lady Stainer's maid, in floating tulle, went into Felicia's bedroom, where she found that young lady alone, very busily employed endeavouring to darken her eyebrows with the help of a little cosmetique. Seeing Trixie, she murmured 'Oh!' and then went calmly on with her occupation.

'What in the world are you doing?' inquired Beatrix, standing on tiptoe, and staring curiously over her companion's white shoulder into the looking-glass.

'Giving some colour to my eyebrows; they are so provokingly destitute of any,' explained Felicia, in a rather injured tone.

'Dear me,' said Trixie. 'How very nice it *does* make you look! Do you think, now, if I—just a little bit, you know, eh?' gingerly applying the beautifier as she spoke to as exquisitely pencilled a pair of brows as anyone need wish to have.

‘There, that is enough; take care, Trixie—not *too* much, you know,’ Miss Rawdon said anxiously, putting her head on one side, and superintending the effect with great *empressement*. ‘You scarcely need it at all, you see, my dear; not like *me*, who am so light. Now turn round and let me look at you—all in black? Well, it is very becoming to your style, which, of course, is everything. And I—how do I look?’

‘Delicious!’ gazing at her friend with open admiration. ‘My dear Felicia, what a charming neck and arms you have, and how you do become white satin!’

Miss Rawdon laughed. ‘Yes, I think I am looking very well,’ she said, gazing complacently at her splendid soft white self in the tall old-fashioned glass behind her. ‘I hope’—with a little sigh—‘everybody else will think so. I believe you and I, Trixie, will be the handsomest in the room to-night.’

‘Oh, say yourself at once, Felicia,’ said Miss Falkland, with affected encouragement in her tone. ‘You really think too little of yourself, and modesty, these days, is a wretched mistake. You know very well there is not a girl downstairs could hold a candle to you.’

‘Very well, then, according to your judgment, I shall be the handsomest here to-night,’ Felicia returned gaily; ‘and you will be the next. Does my train hang gracefully, Trixie? You are ever so much more to be admired than Laura Santly, in my eyes; her mouth is so enormous, and she is so wanting in refinement, poor girl.’

‘Yes, she certainly does lack that repose which marked the Vere de Veres,’ with a light laugh. ‘I am not afraid of *her*, at all events, being happy in the knowledge that I am five times as good-looking. But come, Felicia, come; if you lingered before the glass for another hour you could not be lovelier; and all the people are waiting for us.’

‘Miss Trixie, may I have the pleasure of this dance? I fancy you are not engaged?’ It was Curzon who spoke, somewhere about the middle of the evening; and Miss Falkland turned and slipped her hand acquiescingly within his arm.

‘You are right for once,’ she said.

‘You do not dance at all badly,’ said Lord Stainer presently, in a rather provoking tone; the fact of the matter being that Beatrix danced to perfection, and, what was more, knew she did.

'How good of you to say so,' she murmured, raising her eyes to his with demure modesty. 'I dare say, with a little practice, by-and-by I shall do better.' Whereupon they both laughed and passed out on to one of the balconies that overlooked the garden. It was a delicious night, all moon, and stars, and pale blue light.

'What a dancer that fellow is,' Stainer said, in a moment or so, glancing over his shoulder superciliously back again into the room they had just quitted.

'Who? Mr. Warburton? On the contrary, he is the most charming dancer,' protested Miss Falkland, with raised eyebrows. 'He keeps one so clear of the frantic men, and holds one so—so—comfortably,' she went on, with the most unsuspicious air in the world.

'Does he?' cried Curzon unamiably, with a glance of boiling hatred directed towards the unconscious Warburton, who was smiling sweetly at an idiotic-looking girl in the distance. 'I hope he held you *comfortably* during that ridiculous Tableau this evening, Miss 'Trixie,' sentimentally this. 'I would give a good deal to know for certain whether you like my dancing, or my manner of holding you, or—myself at all.'

'Of course I like you; why should not I? What absurd questions you ask. By-the-by, how extremely beautiful Felicia is looking this evening.'

'Yes, very beautiful,' Felicia's intended said, indifferently, and turned his head away impatiently, as though Miss Rawdon's handsome face was not the uppermost idea with him just then.

'Well, tell me, now, what you have been doing with yourself all day,' Trixie asked presently; 'idling?'

'Never did such a thing in my life,' said Curzon. 'No, I smoked a good deal, and lounged about a good deal, and tormented my mother and Felicia until they turned me out of the room, and, in fact, did everything useful, except going to see you, which you know was forbidden me.'

'No fear you will ever have to reproach yourself, like Titus, by confessing to a "lost day,"' laughed Beatrix. 'How you must enjoy your leisure after such hard work!'

'Very much,' he answered lazily. 'But I miss my friends at times, and perhaps I should have been happier had I seen you during this interminable day.'

'Well, you see me now, so I hope you feel happy at last,'

said Miss Falkland. And then, when it was too late, she wished very much that she had not said it.

Curzon leant back against the ironwork of the balcony and stared hard at her for a minute. 'How do you know you can make me happy?' he said.

'Because it is natural to be contented when with a person that one likes,' replied Beatrix, almost impatiently. 'And, of course, you like me.'

'Beatrix, Beatrix!' interrupted Lord Stainer passionately, 'are you doing it on purpose?' And he caught her hand in his and held it tightly as he spoke.

In a moment the girl was silenced, chilled: all gaiety departed from her. Great a flirt as she was in her own way, her witcheries were harmless. She was honourable, too, and now stood horrified at the mere idea of this man—the chosen of her friend—being led by her into saying what he might ever afterwards repent.

'What are you saying?' she said quietly. 'Will you not resign me my hand? It will be better, as Felicia, if she sees you, will scarcely understand, perhaps, that you are merely in jest. Come back and let us finish our waltz.'

So they went back and finished their waltz in silence, and then Miss Falkland went up to where Miss Dorothy was sitting, very resplendent and dignified, in grey satin and lace.

To her she said, 'You are tired, Aunt Dorothy; you will come home with me now?'

Said Aunt Dorothy: 'My sweetheart, no; I am quite content to sit here for some time longer and watch your dancing. I would not spoil your amusement for the world; and, indeed, I am enjoying myself.'

'How can you tell me such a falsehood, you wicked woman?' Trixie said gaily. 'I command you to come home with me at once, as I really am very tired, and want to go myself.'

Whereupon Miss Falkland senior replied, with heartfelt content: 'My dear, if you *really* wish it, of course I am ready.' And they went.

As they travelled up the Fenton staircase together, about half an hour later, Miss Dorothy asked lovingly, 'You had a happy evening, my dear one?'

And Beatrix said, 'Yes, a charming evening. I do believe the happiest evening in all my life,' and straightway went into

her bedroom and locked her door, and cried bitterly for two long hours.

That night was doomed, I think, to be a night of mishaps and half-declarations, hopeless as they were unfinished. Even while Curzon was putting Miss Falkland and her niece Beatrix into their carriage, another scene was taking place very near them, in what was called the long conservatory, which, had they known it, might have given both Stainer and Beatrix great cause for thought. Miss Rawdon and Captain Dudley, having finished their dance, had wandered in there amongst the flowers, with no ulterior designs beyond gaining a little rest and time before the next dance should claim them. The conservatory door was thrown wide open, and the cool night air came streaming in upon them as they stood together and drank in gratefully its sweet, generous draughts.

They were very silent, these two—strangely so—silent with thoughts too deep for words. All night long there had seemed to hover round them some subtle, indefinable danger, that might at any moment declare itself and cause inextricable confusion. They feared the very sweetness of the loneliness they were now enjoying, and yet they lingered.

Each sought longingly to read the other's thoughts, and perhaps both did in reality guess more than half the truth. Once Felicia, raising her eyes, met those of Dudley fixed upon her intently with a strange, untranslatable expression in them that no true woman ever yet misunderstood. She, at least, did not, and lowered her eyes suddenly, with new-born shyness, flushing and paling again perceptibly. After that, she grew very nervous—almost painfully so—and strove eagerly to think of some commonplace to utter, but none came to her assistance. Glancing upwards for inspiration, she found that the gleaming stars only dazzled her, while the very quiet beauty of the night merely made her own heart seem more restless in comparison. She moved impatiently, and, as she moved, her handkerchief fell to the ground. They both stooped to recover it, and in so doing their hands met. It was enough. 'Felicia!' he murmured, a ring of passionate love and despair running through his voice, his face cold and white.

Meanwhile the careless stars gleamed on triumphantly; the band played its merriest strains. Dull care seemed to have no part in that gay assemblage, where all around was musical laughter, mingled with pleasant youthful voices. All

was gaiety, flowers, and sweetest music ; and Lady Stainer was fretting herself to death because she foolishly imagined her handsome son was paying more than ordinary attention to black-eyed Laura Santly ; and the handsome son himself was bitterly regretting the engagement that debarred him from ever making the woman he best loved his own ; and Beatrix Falkland was crying herself miserably to sleep in her own room ; and Felicia Rawdon, as, with trembling fingers and throbbing heart, she undressed herself that night, found that her handkerchief was missing.

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It was a bright, warm afternoon in the middle of July, just two months since the last occurrences I have mentioned, during which time nothing remarkable had happened. Captain Dudley still lingered on with his cousin—having obtained further leave of absence—seeing Miss Rawdon dangerously often ; and Curzon day by day discovered more surely that his heart was no longer in his own possession.

Said Stainer to himself this morning : ‘ It is a lovely day. I will go down to Fenton and see—Miss Dorothy,’ which was the meanest equivocation possible on his part.

So he went : and, coming on the little grass parterre at the side of the house, where gaudy, old-fashioned flowers bloomed in luxuriant profusion, encountered *not* Miss Dorothy, but her niece Beatrix.

Now, Miss Falkland, junior, having seen nothing further in his lordship’s conduct to confirm the suspicions he had aroused two months before, had gradually dropped back into her old manner to him, and restored him to favour. She met him now with all her usual pretty frankness.

‘ Oh, is it you ? ’ she said ; ‘ well, you are welcome. What brought you down to-day ? ’

‘ What a question ! ’ Curzon exclaimed. ‘ What do you suppose I came down for, but to see—*you*. ’

‘ Thank you. Then you are doubly welcome. I always make it a point to patronise anyone who comes to see *me*,’ with an emphasis. ‘ But, now, tell me what especially brought you here to see *me* this afternoon. ’

‘ Well, the fact is,’ Curzon said, drawing a letter slowly from his pocket, ‘ I heard from a friend of mine to-day who is in some trouble, and I want you to give me your advice about him. Will you ? ’

'Of course I will,' answered Miss Falkland, who was the pleasantest creature in the world to confide in; full of heart-felt sympathy for everybody's misfortunes, in spite of all her thoughtlessness.

'This is it, then,' he said calmly, but somehow not looking at his companion, while he crushed up the harmless letter in his hand. 'My friend is engaged to be married; but the girl to whom he is engaged doesn't particularly care for him, and he himself has fallen deeply in love with another, for whom he cares as he never has, and never can again care for any one else. Under these circumstances, what ought my friend to do? Should he keep to his engagement?'

'Yes. I think he should keep to his engagement,' Miss Falkland said slowly.

'Even though he has no heart in the matter?'

'Yes—even then. If your friend is an honourable man, he will certainly not break his word once given. He must hold to that: there is no other course left open to a gentleman.'

'Is that your verdict?' Curzon said sadly, coming over the other side of the bed to where she was standing. 'Do you allow him no hope? Must he wreck all his chances of happiness for the sake of an hour's folly? Would it not be more honourable to break such a loveless engagement than to keep it?'

'If I were the other woman and your friend came to me with such a story on his lips, I would not so much as give him my hand,' Miss Falkland said very bravely; and then she turned pale, and folded her hands together tightly.

'You are a cruel judge,' Stainer answered bitterly. 'And yet—I know that you are right.'

'Curzon,' whispered Beatrix softly, in tremulous tones, 'is it your own story you are telling me?'

'Oh, Beatrix,' said poor Curzon; and took her hand passionately between his own.

'I feared so,' she said tenderly; 'and now you must never come here again. Hush!—I am in earnest: surely you yourself must see the necessity for that.' With sweet earnestness, she laid her hand again upon his arm, and raised her large pleading grey eyes to his; and Curzon, who had been eagerly watching the variations of her small brown face during the past few minutes, seeing it now so close to his own, in a mad moment stooped and kissed her.

Perhaps, under the circumstances, it was the very best

thing he could have done : at least it put an end to all sentimentality on the spot, and this latter article was very largely in the ascendant just then. Beatrix was by no means one of your crying sort on these occasions, being more capable of going into a towering rage ; and therefore into a towering rage she went forthwith.

‘How dare you,’ she gasped, ‘how dare you? The idea of your so insulting me! Get out of my garden this moment, and go home ; and see if I don’t go up to Felicia to-morrow morning and tell her every bit of it.’

‘You can tell Felicia what you please,’ said he meekly, feeling utterly subdued by this outburst, besides being conscience-stricken into the bargain. ‘I deserve all you can say, and more, but it was the thought of losing you—of never seeing you again—that made me so far forget myself. It is my only excuse, and—oh, Beatrix, my darling, I will go away from you for ever if you wish it ; only forgive me before I go.’

‘I won’t,’ said Miss Falkland indignantly. ‘I never will. Why do you stay, then, when I desire you to go?’

‘Because I *cannot* leave you in anger,’ Curzon pleaded desperately. ‘Surely, when you see me so wretched, you will give me a kind word to take away with me. If you say I must marry Felicia, I will do so, but for all that, you know well that it is you alone possess my heart. Beatrix, say I am forgiven, and I promise you shall never see me again.’

‘Well, on those conditions I forgive you,’ said Miss Falkland solemnly, extending to him her hand as a token of pardon. ‘And—and—I *do* hope you will be happy, Curzon, and—Felicia is a great deal nicer girl than *I* am, and will make you happier—I know ; al—though—’ With which faint attempt at consolation, Beatrix burst into tears, and ran away to hide her sorrows in her own chamber.

‘Curzon,’ said Felicia.

‘Felicia,’ said Curzon.

It was the evening of the same day, and they were both stationed outside on the very same balcony where Stainer had so nearly betrayed himself to Beatrix a few short weeks before. One of the windows was thrown open casement fashion, and on the low sill sat Felicia, looking like a beautiful framed picture, all golden hair, and fair white skin, and

delicate pale-blue skirt. Her hands were folded listlessly upon her lap, but on either cheek there burned a bright hectic spot that betokened clearly how some deep agitation was disturbing the surface of the usual calmness.

'I have something to say to you,' she began, in a rather troubled tone.

'Then suppose you say it, my dear,' Curzon suggested calmly. He was leaning against the frame of the window, unconsciously setting off to perfection, with his magnificent height and figure, Miss Rawdon's extreme beauty. Not that he in the slightest degree appreciated her faultless face just then.

Thus admonished, however, Miss Rawdon, unwitting of his thoughts, gathered together all her energies, and plunged bravely into her self-imposed task.

'It is this then,' she said hurriedly. 'I do not mean to be unkind, and you must forgive me, Curzon, but—but—I am a little tired of our engagement.'

After this announcement there ensued a long pause—a silence so intense that the very humming of some bees half a field away could be distinctly heard. Would he never speak? Miss Rawdon felt that the stillness was becoming unbearable. She glanced sideways at him, and could see that he was looking down, and had turned a dark crimson, but other symptoms of surprise or indignation there were none. He had not suffered his cigar to go out, neither had he seemed to lose his relish for it. He smoked away persistently as ever; and how was she to know that the man's heart beneath all this outward calmness was almost suffocating him with its wild throbbing? His coolness frightened Miss Rawdon more than all the high talking in the world could have done. Was he intent upon keeping her to this hated engagement? Ah, if it should be so! She clasped her hands together very closely and rose.

'You will give me up?' she said.

And he said: 'I can scarcely do that, considering *you* have just thrown *me* over.' And then Felicia knew that it was all over, and she was free to marry the man she loved. He *was* going to be honourable, she felt, and half made up her mind to cry, but decided afterwards that it might seem undignified, and so refrained. Presently Curzon roused himself, and, knocking the ashes from his cigar, asked quietly—

‘Who is the man for whose sake you have broken off with me? Is it Arthur Dudley?’

‘Yes, it is Arthur,’ Miss Rawdon allowed, lowering her eyes, and feeling completely subdued.

‘Well, I hope you will be very happy with him,’ her cousin said, gravely and kindly. ‘Am I to tell the mother all about it for you; or has Dudley——’

‘Oh, no, no!’ exclaimed Felicia quickly, forgetting her dignity at this point, and dissolving into tears. ‘Of course he would not, until you had given me my freedom. Oh, Curzon dear! if you *would* but speak to Aunt Agnes, she will be so—and you know I am sorry, but I could not help it, and—and—you are not angry with me, Curzon, are you?’

‘No, I am not in the least angry with you,’ Curzon answered, kissing with unusual warmth her upturned face; after which she went away to her own sitting-room, well content with the success of her interview.

When she had gone her grave cousin strangely and most suddenly disappeared, leaving a young man standing in his shoes who, with a radiant face and triumphant air, flung his cigar to the winds, while he exclaimed rapturously: ‘I am free: I will go this moment and tell Beatrix.’

It was almost touching to witness the ecstatic manner in which he ran down the steps of that famous balcony, and made off through the park towards Fenton, utterly oblivious of the fact that he was minus his hat. He strode along under the grand old oaks with his handsome Saxon head erect, exulting fondly over this happy change that had come to pass in his life. And then he fell to picturing Beatrix as mistress at Stainers, running here and there with her bonny gipsy face, and happy voice, and changeful, loving ways. As he arrived so far in his blissful day-dreams, he reached the low wall that bounded Miss Falkland’s shrubberies, and having vaulted it, walked along by the tiny half-hidden pathway that led to the public avenue, where in the distance he heard the sound of lowered voices.

He was effectually sheltered from view himself by a huge overgrown laurel, that rose most opportunely before him; but of that he thought not. Raising his eyes suddenly towards the spot from whence the sounds emanated, a few yards beyond him on the gravelled walk he saw—ah! what was it he saw?—not Beatrix, not the girl he so truly loved, in the arms of an utter stranger?

He started as though he had been struck, and, though as honourable a fellow as ever lived, he found that it was beyond his power to stir from the spot. He paused spell-bound, chilled to the heart's core. Beatrix was speaking; and if it had been to save his life he could not have moved a limb.

'So that is all settled, then,' Trixie said, in her usual soft wooing voice; 'and now I am afraid, my darling, you must go.'

'I am afraid so,' the tall stranger answered, tightening his arm affectionately round her; 'it has been a wretchedly short visit, has it not? But next time I will try and manage better. Good-bye, my pet, I will write the very moment I get there.'

'If you do not, I shall never forgive you. I shall be so anxious to hear of your safe arrival. And now you are quite sure you are sufficiently careful about your throat, George?' standing on tip-toe to run her fingers lovingly round his neck, to see if he was well cared for, and to the great detriment of his collar. Curzon ground his teeth. 'You should remember your last illness, you know, and you always *are* so careless.'

'Not I. There is no fear of me, believe me. But now good-bye indeed, for the last time, my darling; I *must* be off.' Whereupon Beatrix raised her face and kissed him, seemingly with all her heart.

It was enough. Sickened, and frantic with rage and grief, Curzon turned away, walking once more in the direction of his home. Bitter anger was at his heart.

But when he had walked about half-way, he came to a sudden stand-still, and began to think rapidly: the result of which thinking brought him back again to Fenton at once and on to the same grass-plot where he had so signalised himself in the morning's encounter.

Miss Beatrix Falkland was there before him, with an enormous watering-pot in her hand, and did not look as much cut-up as she *ought* to have looked, considering the parting scene she had just gone through.

'Good-evening,' she said, with a certain amount of ill-disguised awkwardness that only added to her charms, and flushing crimson. She was thinking of the morning's work, you see, but he was not, and so put down the pretty blushing and awkwardness to another cause altogether.

He made no return whatever to her civil greeting, but began his mission at once, without any preliminaries.

‘So you have got a lover,’ he said, with the most touching attempt at calmness. ‘I suppose I ought to congratulate you, Beatrix, but somehow I feel the words would choke me. Felicia has thrown me over of her own accord, and I came down here this evening to tell you so, thinking in my mad folly that perhaps you might care to hear it. But I confess I scarcely expected to find you in the arms of a stranger.’

Here he paused for a moment.

‘Good gracious!’ exclaimed Miss Falkland from the opposite side of a flower-bed, composed of scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolarias, that glowed with brilliant warmth in the deepening twilight. She was frightened, dismayed at his vehemence, and just a little angry.

‘At least you might have told me. You talk of honour, but I think it would have been more honourable of you had you told me of this months ago—before I was hopelessly in love with you—before it was too late, as it is now. I could never tell you what I think of your conduct, so I sha’n’t try. I have done with women from this day forth. I do not go so far as to wish you unhappiness—I *could* not wish you that—but I believe from my soul that deceitfulness never brought good to anyone, and you yourself know well how far you have deceived me. You are merely a heartless flirt. I have no more to say to you.’ And as he finished speaking he turned on his heel and moved away a few steps.

But Miss Falkland was by no means satisfied that he should go just yet. Her slight anger during the commencement of his tirade had risen by degrees until at last it had reached a white heat. She had waxed very wroth indeed by this time, and was determined he should now listen to *her* line of argument, and receive what old ladies are wont to call a piece of their minds, before he went on his way this evening. So she began: ‘Have you not? Are you quite certain you have finished all you wished to say? Well, then, perhaps now you will be so kind as to listen to *me* for a few moments. You have called me deceitful and dishonourable, but at all events *I* was never accused of playing spy upon anyone’s actions. You are—or have been—up to this engaged to Felicia, and therefore by what right do you, an engaged man, take me, or any other girl, to task about this lover or that? Are you my father confessor that you consider me bound to tell you all my private affairs? What do you mean by coming down here to insult me, and be insolent to me?’

'I certainly did not mean either to insult you or be insolent to you,' Curzon said.

'I really cannot understand what you *do* mean,' passionately; 'but, at all events, you *have* been most successfully insolent. You have called me deceitful, dishonourable, and a flirt. I wonder what all *that* comes to. And now—drawing up her small figure scornfully, until she looked at least three inches taller in her righteous anger—'and now let me tell you this: that man who kissed me and called me his darling was *not* a lover but my second brother, Captain George Falkland!' After which triumphant declaration Miss Falkland gathered together all her energies, and marched past the vanquished enemy into the house with flying colours.

Said Curzon to himself: 'Her brother, George Falkland! *Who* would have thought it? Heaven and earth! what a fool I have made of myself!'

And really, on the whole, I rather think he had.

'Good-evening, Miss Trixie,' said Lord Stainer from the top of the low garden-wall, where he had planted himself.

It was the evening of the next day, and as yet the moral atmosphere was decidedly cloudy.

'Good-evening,' returned Miss Falkland, and made a very stately inclination of her head to the raspberry-bush opposite which she was standing.

'It is a fine evening, is it not, Miss Trixie?' began his lordship again, turning round so that his legs were *inside* the garden-wall this time.

'Very,' uncompromisingly.

A pause.

'Well,' said Curzon presently, apostrophising a distant apple-tree, 'in my young days I remember there used to be such a thing as hospitality. You are going to ask me to eat some of your fruit, Miss Trixie, are not you?'

'I do not suppose I could keep you out, even if I tried,' she said.

'Which means that I have your permission to descend,' and, at once dropping down from the wall, he came over to where she was standing. 'Good-evening,' he said again, and held out his hand.

'I am very sorry,' said Miss Falkland coldly, 'but I have so stained my hand with raspberry-juice that I could not dream of putting it into yours.'

‘Dear me, so you have,’ with evident concern. ‘What a pity! what a shame so to ruin such extremely lovely little hands. Shall I help you?’ he went on pleasantly—he was the laziest fellow alive—‘shall I? I should like to very much, if you will allow me. I dare say I could learn to pick raspberries if I tried; and when I have brought my fingers to the correct colour, perhaps *then* you might not object to put your hand in mine. If I help you, Miss Falkland, will you ask me in to tea?’

‘I am quite sure Aunt Dorothy will be very charmed to see you,’ answered Aunt Dorothy’s niece, with a great amount of dignity.

Stainer picked one raspberry and then flung it away. ‘Beatrix, won’t you forgive me?’ he said, and caught both her hands in his.

‘I don’t think I *ought* to,’ Beatrix answered in a low tone; and then in another moment he had her in his arms, and was kissing her with all his heart.

‘My dear love!’ he said presently, when they had both sworn that nothing on earth should ever make either of them say an unkind word to the other again—‘my dear love, what a mistake I made, and what a jealous wretch of a husband you are getting!’ As he spoke he held her very closely to him, and looked as handsome and proud and happy as any young fellow could well look.

‘You will never be jealous of me,’ Beatrix told him seriously, ‘because you know, Curzon, nobody could ever even *seem* to be the same to me that you are.’ Whereupon he kissed her again.

‘And now tell me all about Felicia,’ she said.

‘We must go in now,’ she declared presently, when they had asked and answered a hundred interrogations satisfactorily, slipping her hand within her lover’s arm, and picking up her little basket of raspberries with a most demure air. ‘Aunt Dorothy will think I am lost. And now mind, Curzon, you must be very good, and not laugh one bit, because Aunt Dorothy thinks very solemnly about engagements and marriages and all that.’

So they went in together hand in hand, to tell their story; during the telling of which Stainer behaved perfectly, neither laughing nor otherwise misconducting himself, and Aunt Dorothy was affected to tears. But as she said herself, these tears only showed how very glad she was, and how happy

in the thought that now for evermore her darling would be near her.

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Little more need be told beyond the mere fact of their marriages, which came off almost immediately. Miss Rawdon became Mrs. Dudley within two months of the breaking-off of her old engagement, and, Captain Dudley having sold out, they took a house near Stainers, where they settled down, and are living very comfortably and happily.

Miss Falkland's wedding was, of course, a much more elaborate affair, Aunt Dorothy being determined that her niece should surpass herself on that day. So she had twelve bridesmaids, and the oldest lace, and the richest satin, and the largest and most indigestible wedding-cake that ever yet was seen; and it was Captain George Falkland who gave away the bride.

CLARISSA'S CHOICE.

‘Some griefs are med’cinable.’—*Cymbeline*.

It is growing dusk. The fire in the library, although the time is early in June, is burning briskly. A greyhound, a very handsome specimen of its kind, lies sleeping on the hearth-rug. There is a general air of comfort in all the surroundings, yet Mr. Dugdale—whose admiration for the country is not unrestrained, and who has come down to his neglected estate only because a long-forgotten sense of duty and a new steward have called him—is sitting with his hands before him, wondering, in a melancholy fashion, what on earth he is going to do with himself for the next month.

If, he soliloquizes, he even knew anyone in the county! Of course they will all call, the Katlins especially, but new acquaintances are such a bore. And dinners where French cooks are unknown—pah! He doesn’t know a tenant on his estate, or a landlord in the district, except old Major Hyde, who, probably, would be considered unendurable in town. He wonders, vaguely, what Thistleton is doing now, and Dunmore, and all that lot; perhaps——

‘A lady wishes to see you, sir,’ says Hickson, speaking in a respectful undertone from the doorway.

‘I sincerely hope *not*, Hickson,’ responds his master lazily, without turning his head. ‘I really couldn’t, you know. I have come down here, against my will, partly to escape all that kind of thing. And having sacrificed myself, I insist on quiet.’

‘She says, sir——’

‘I know all about it,’ with an impatient gesture; ‘just say I am ill, dying, dead, *buried*—anything, only send her away.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ with an apologetic cough, ‘but she seems so urgent; and I could not possibly take it upon

myself to dismiss the lady in question. I believe you would not wish it, sir, if——'

'You have evidently made up your mind I shall receive her,' resignedly; 'there is, therefore, nothing for it but to submit. I am incapable of argument under my present depressing circumstances. Is she,' desperately, 'a woman or a lady, Hickson?'

'A lady, sir; *quite* the lady.'

'Ah!—old or young?'

'Not old, sir; and not *too* young either.'

'Neither old nor young. That generally means forty. *Is* she forty?'

'Dear me, no, sir—nothing of the kind. I beg pardon, sir, I merely meant to imply she was a good deal more than eighteen.'

'You are invaluable, Hickson; I have always said it,' with a flash of admiration. 'Show her in.'

'Another of the personal begging-letter sort,' says Mr. Dugdale to himself, with a meek shrug, unlocking a drawer that contains money. 'Better have it ready; the only thing I know of to get rid of them in a hurry.' Sinking back in his chair, he puts on his most miserable air, and prepares for an ignominious defeat.

There is some slight delay; then the faint rustle of a woman's skirts, a word or two from the admirable Hickson, who then throws wide the door, and announces 'Miss Carew,' in his usual well-bred monotone.

Dugdale, rising from his seat, with some precipitancy, makes her a deferential bow. There is extreme respect, though a good deal of irrepressible surprise, in his manner as his eyes meet hers.

She is young—about three-and-twenty—very slender, very excellently formed, of middle height, and extremely pretty. Her eyes are a clear, dark grey; her light brown hair is covered by a large hat, trimmed handsomely with feathers; a grey gown fits her rounded figure to perfection; her hands are encased in irreproachable gloves. Dugdale, as he looks at her, repents him of the 'begging-letter' idea, and, at the bare remembrance of it, colours slightly. So does his visitor, though from far different motives.

'I must ask you to pardon this intrusion,' she says, in a low tone, though perfectly distinct, and full of dignity and sweetness. 'I would not have come myself, but my brother

is quite an invalid, suffering from an accident, and it was necessary one of us should see you. When we heard you were returning to town again so soon, it frightened us into action.'

'I do not return to London for a month.'

'Indeed!' with suppressed chagrin. 'We were told you intended leaving to-morrow or next day. Had I known the truth——'

'Pray sit down,' says Dugdale, courteously handing her a chair, 'and let me know what I can do for you.'

'I should have introduced myself,' she says, with a faint smile. 'My brother and I are your tenants, Mr. Dugdale, and have, I think, some slight claim on your forbearance. The place—Weston Lodge; you know it?—has been in the possession of our family for years. First, my grandfather had it from *your* grandfather; then my father had it; now my brother has it; but our lease has expired.' She pauses.

'You make me feel ashamed that I know so little of my tenants, or their wishes or concerns,' he says. 'I know, indeed, nothing of the neighbourhood. My living so much abroad is my only excuse. But that my late steward, poor fellow, died, and that the new man insisted on my presence here for a few weeks, I should not be in this house now. Yes, you want a new lease—is that it?'

'That is it,' with a glance of surprise at his evident indifference to, or ignorance of, all that has been going on of late. 'The question is, shall we get it? The new man you speak of—Graham—has, I think, advised you to the contrary. He wishes to take our farm and incorporate it with the fields that lie beyond it, and let it all out at a higher value. Of course we can retain the house, but without the land it is useless to us, as my brother is fond of farming. We are willing you should raise our rent—we would gladly take all those fields I speak of, that stretch to the south of us, but, unfortunately, just now we cannot. I thought, if I were to ask you, you would perhaps reconsider your steward's advice, and let us keep our *home*.'

The sweet voice trembles ever such a little, the grey eyes fall, the little delicately-gloved hand taps nervously upon the table near her.

'Have you spoken to Graham?' asks Dugdale, who, just at this moment, could have soundly rated his over-zealous manager.

'No. We thought it better to see you, yourself. Will you think of it?' She raises her eyes again, and regards him earnestly, entreatingly. 'To me it would not so much matter,' she adds gently, 'but my brother—his heart is in the place; he has been delicate of late, and all this anxiety preys upon him, and retards his recovery. We have been good tenants; I would ask you not to dispossess us.'

'I shall speak to Graham to-morrow. Pray do not disturb yourself about it; I promise you,' says Mr. Dugdale, who is singularly pliable where beauty pleads, 'you shall keep your home. Nobody shall dispossess you.'

'How shall I thank you!' exclaims she with grateful warmth, rising. Tears of emotion shine in her dark eyes. 'I hardly dared hope when I came, and now'—she pauses, and again a smile curves her lips—'I can go back to George and make him happy.'

'It makes yourself happy too, I trust?'

A little shadow falls into Miss Carew's eyes. They droop.

'Thank you—yes,' she answers, but there is a faint weariness, a curious pain, discernible in her tone.

She bows slightly, and turns to the door.

'Let me see you to your'—carriage he is going to say, but hesitates. She certainly looks like a woman who should have carriages at her disposal, but he remembers hearing from Graham that Weston is but a small place, and checks himself.

'Yes—I drove over,' she says quietly. And then he follows her to the hall-door steps, and sees there waiting for her a tiny phaeton, a tiny pony, and a groom holding its head. All is well appointed, and, though small, perfect.

Miss Carew gives her hand to Dugdale, and steps into the phaeton; the groom springs in behind, and hands his mistress the reins; she turns, and bestows upon her landlord a smile, short, though exceedingly sweet, and in another minute, pony, tiger, lady, and all have disappeared down the avenue.

He, left standing upon the gravel, watches her retreat, until distance has indeed swallowed up all traces of her, and as he looks he muses.

What a sad little face she had, but how expressive! what sweetness in the eyes! Yes, beyond doubt it all lay in her eyes; there wasn't much to speak of in the rest of her features, except her mouth, which was charming—but there was cer-

tainly a fascination in her eyes. What did Graham mean by creating such confusion, all about a paltry few pounds a year, more or less? It was most officious of him.

After all, a fellow ought to come down and see about his tenants every now and then, and consult their wishes, and see after their——

‘Well, Dugdale, my boy, and how are you?’ says a mellow voice behind him, and turning, he beholds *the* Major.

‘Ah, Hyde, I’m uncommonly glad to see you,’ exclaims he brightening, and telling the honest truth. Even Hyde, old-fashioned as he is, brings a welcome with him, being, as it were, a breath from the world of town.

‘Thank you. Heard of your arrival, and just dropped down to get a look at you, and ask you to dine to-morrow night. Know how slow you must find it vegetating in the wilderness. I came through the park, and just saw Miss Carew driving away. Monstrous pretty girl, I take it. Came about the lease, eh? You must give her her own way there, Dugdale, you must indeed, you know,’ says the kindly Major.

‘I have given it,’ says Dugdale.

‘Glad of it—glad of it. The only right thing to do. I might have known she would get no refusal from you. Beauty in distress, my boy, is all-powerful, eh? You have nothing that can touch on her this season, come now,’ says the ancient hero, with an airy laugh that still retains all the freshness of nineteen. ‘I lay you anything you like you haven’t seen a prettier girl this year.’

‘Yes, I have,’ laughing, ‘but few so—so—*haunting*. I like grey eyes. Come in and dine with me, Hyde; it will be a charity, and may perhaps save me from suicide; I can’t stand my own company.’

‘I shall be delighted,’ says the Major, who, next to having some one to dine with him, likes best to dine with some one. He is fond of society and young men, and is especially fond of Dugdale.

As they lounge through the gardens enjoying a cigar before dinner, the Major grows communicative, and relates many things. Touching on the Carews, he finds himself encouraged by his host, and forthwith enlarges on the topic.

‘There is only she and George,’ says he, ‘and they are quite devoted; *she* thinks there is nobody like George, and *he* thinks the same about Clarissa, and I quite agree with him.’

'You seem rather *épris* there,' says Dugdale smiling; 'George, as you call him, is ill, is he not?'

'Knocked himself to bits last winter, out hunting. Ribs, leg, head, all went to smash, and even now he is only slowly recovering. No doubt he will pluck up in a hurry, now this lease worry is at an end, but at one time I confess I thought he was done for. That poor child, Clarissa, was quite ill, between grief and nursing.'

'Ah! That is what makes her look so sad, I suppose?'

'Well, no—not altogether,' mysteriously.

'Anything more?' turning sharply; 'not a disappointment in love, surely? It is an impertinence even to imagine it.'

'I may as well tell you all about it,' says old Hyde, who adores the sound of his own voice, and is beginning to enjoy himself intensely. 'All the world here knows the story, so as you are sure to hear it from some quarter, sooner or later, I sha'n't be breaking confidence by telling you. And you may as well hear a true version of it. You made a good guess: it *was* an unhappy love affair.'

'He had bad taste, whoever he was,' says Dugdale, with a faintly unpleasant ring in his tone. He has already begun to feel an interest in his lovely tenant, and when a man feels an interest in a woman, however slight, he takes it badly when he is told she, in her turn, has felt an interest in some foreign quarter.

'You know Sir Wilfred Haughton? Well, he was the man. They were engaged to be married about three years ago, everything was arranged; never was there a fellow so much in love, as *we* thought, when suddenly a cousin of Clarissa's came on the scene. A pretty girl, I am bound to say, but bad, sir, bad to the heart's core. There was something fetching about her, I suppose, because every man in the neighbourhood (except myself, Dugdale, I am proud to say) made an ass of himself about her. But she laid her plans cleverly, and never ceased till she had wiled Haughton from his allegiance, and, I verily believe, broke Clarissa's heart. She has never held up her head since. Fairly crushed she was, and all for a most unworthy object, as I cannot help thinking him.'

'You put it mildly. A man who could be guilty of such an act must be termed an unmitigated blackguard,' says Dugdale, calmly knocking the ash off his cigar.

'So I think. But the cream of the joke is to follow. Madame Violet having made her little game, and cajoled Haughton to the top of her bent, coolly threw him over at the last moment, and married a city man with no birth to mention, but unlimited coin.'

'Serve him right,' viciously. 'I knew him slightly, but can't say I fancied him; weak, it seemed to me, and self-opinionated. He has been abroad for some time.'

'Fit of the spleens. They say he is coming home at the end of the month, so I dare say he has got over it.'

'How will Miss Carew like his being in the neighbourhood again?'

'She is very game,' says the Major; 'proud, you know, and that—she won't show what she really feels. Perhaps his coming will cure her effectually, and settle matters for ever.'

'You mean, she will probably accept him a second time?'

'Accept him! Nonsense, sir, she will *reject* him, and that with scorn—with *scorn!*' says the Major, flushing with indignation.

A month renders the Carews very intimate with their landlord—which is hardly to be wondered at, as scarcely a day passes without his coming to Weston, avowedly to sit with George, but in reality to see Clarissa.

Now, he does not even care to conceal from himself the fact that his early admiration for her has deepened into love. Yet his attachment causes him only unhappiness, having in it all the elements of disappointment to come, Clarissa apparently being utterly indifferent to it. She is very sweet, very gentle, and treats him with all the kind familiarity of a sister, but even he cannot deceive himself into the belief that there is anything sentimental in her regard.

One evening towards the close of this month Dugdale happens to be dining at the lodge. He has dined there often of late, young Carew having taken an enormous fancy to him, being indeed almost low-spirited when he is out of his sight. All through dinner Clarissa has been singularly *distracted* and meditative; there is a far-off look in her clear grey eyes—her lover is quick to mark. Strolling in the garden with her, later on, through the warm, sweet, wooing July air, he suddenly breaks the long silence by saying—

'How quiet you are this evening. Has anything vexed you—disturbed you?'

'Have I betrayed myself even to you?' she says, with a

smile and a rare faint blush. 'No—yes—I confess it; I *should* not be disturbed, but I *am*—in that lies my self-contempt. It makes me angry with myself to know I am annoyed, but I cannot help it. I heard to-day Sir Wiltred Haughton is coming home to-morrow!' Her voice has fallen slightly.

'Yes, I know.' He has turned his face away from hers.

'Of course you have heard all that old story,' she says quite calmly, but with another blush so vivid as to bring tears to her eyes. 'It seems very old now. Every one knows it; *that* thought was bitter to me just at first, but now I scarcely seem to mind it, and you are so good a friend I can speak to you about it. It is very disheartening, is it not,' with a little constrained laugh, 'that, after all one's inward lectures, one should find oneself as far from indifference as ever?'

Mistaking her meaning altogether, he winces perceptibly.

'Does his coming distress you?'

'Yes,' slowly, 'it distresses me; and yet I cannot say whether it makes me glad or sorry. After all, he was an old friend before—before anything foolish occurred between us. I do not forget that.'

'No doubt he has, long ere this, repented his crowning—nay, his *only* act of folly.' They have got down to the wicket-gate by this time, that leads into the haggard, and he, leaning his arms upon it, continues, always with his eyes turned from hers: 'What if he is coming home because the first and best love is still strong within him? It may be that he is coming to gain forgiveness.'

'Oh, no, *no*!' shrinking, 'I hope not. That would be terrible. I *hope* not! But,' with an effort, 'it is impossible.'

'I think it is so utterly possible that I am almost sure of it,' says Dugdale, who takes a savage pleasure in piling up his own agony. 'No man, under the circumstances, would elect to come to the place again, unless with such an object.'

'You frighten me,' she says; and then she sighs, and brushes back her soft hair impatiently from her temples. 'Would *you* act so in such a case?' she asks presently, in a slow, dreamy tone.

Then he turns to look at her, and their eyes meet. The tender silence of coming night is all around. The faint, melodious lowing of the oxen in the far-off meadows alone breaks the stillness of the evening, that is dying with such lingering sweetness.

'I cannot answer that question,' returns he, a little un-

steadily; 'I could not picture myself in such a case. Had I dared to love you it would have been with such a love as would have lasted to my dying day!'

Silence again. She has grown very pale, and the hand that trifles with the huge bunch of crimson roses so lately plucked is trembling slightly. The cows are coming slowly towards them through the cool deep grass; the birds, high over their heads, are twittering drowsily a last good-night; George's voice from the verandah calls to them to return.

'You are thinking of the past?' says Dugdale hurriedly, taking one of the roses from her.

'Yes—and of the future,' replies she, in a troubled tone.

'Clarissa! you still love him?'

'How shall I tell?' returns she, with a touch of passion. 'I have so long brooded over my unhappy story—so often told myself I shall never again——' She pauses abruptly. 'I want to see him,' she says, after a slight hesitation.

'Naturally,' with some bitterness.

'No, you mistake. I want to see him,' slowly, 'because, when I do—on the *instant*—I shall know.'

'Know what?' eagerly.

'My own heart,' replies she, somewhat sadly.

Three days later, walking along the quiet road that leads to Weston, Clive Dugdale comes upon Clarissa and a stranger, evidently in earnest conversation. Even from the distance he can see the stranger is Sir Wilfred Haughton, and that he and Clarissa are on friendly terms. It is plainly, however, a chance encounter, because Haughton's horse is standing beside him, and even as Dugdale, with a beating heart, marks all these facts, they shake hands, and Haughton, mounting again, rides briskly away.

As Dugdale comes up with her, Clarissa turns gladly to greet him, with a bright smile. Her face is delicately flushed; there is an unwonted brilliancy in her eyes: she is altogether a changed, and even a lovelier Clarissa than usual.

'That was Sir Wilfred?' remarks he superfluously, regarding her curiously—jealously.

'Yes,' still smiling.

'Your very first meeting with him has wrought a wonderful change in your appearance. You are pleased?'

'It was not our first meeting. Last evening he called to

see us just after you had left. Had you remained to dinner, as George and I wished, you would have met him.'

'Should I? Thanks. The loss is not irreparable. I would rather see George and you, when alone. But you have not yet answered me; though, indeed, I scarcely need an answer when I look at you. You are brighter, more radiant, than I have ever yet seen you. You *were* pleased to see him?'

'*Very!*' emphatically. 'Why not? After all, as I told you, he is an old friend; I hardly remember the time I did not know him.'

'And,' bending a little to look into her eyes, which meet his frankly, 'you now—"know"?''

'Yes—now I "know,"' returns she, with a quiet though very intense satisfaction.

'And you are quite happy?' There is a shade upon his face that grows deeper every second. She, having averted her eyes, fails to see it.

'Very happy,' she answers quietly. 'Happier than I have been for three full years. A long time, is it not?' she asks, a little wistfully.

'Yes. I congratulate you,' in a somewhat forced tone. They have reached the entrance to Weston; and he now puts out his hand to say good-bye.

'You will come in?' surprised.

'Not to-day, thank you.'

'Oh, *do*,' with open disappointment; 'George will be so grieved if you do not.'

'George must excuse me to-day; I cannot go in now,' he says, almost curtly, and, raising his hat, walks determinedly away.

His heart is filled to overflowing with bitterness and sad forebodings. Is it, indeed, all over? Can his sweet dreams and happy thoughts have met with such a cruel death? Again he sees her lovely face as she turned it to greet him, flushed with content and gladness. Of course the blush had been for Haughton; already her poor wounded heart has found comfort in the very nearness of the beloved.

Pshaw! why dwell upon the inevitable, like a love-sick girl! He will throw up the whole business, leave for London in the morning, and try in absence to forget.

But when the morning comes he lingers. A faint hope—that is almost despair, so closely does it border on it—holds

him still in bondage, and compels him to stay on and witness the final scene in this small drama.

But at the end of the second month even this faint star of hope has been drowned in the giant flood of despair. He has no longer any sustaining doubts. Day by day, meeting his rival at Weston, he notes Clarissa's kindly manner towards him, the frank warmth of her look and tones.

As for himself, her demeanour towards him has completely changed. It seems to him as though now she purposely avoids his society, and shrinks from any *tête-à-tête* chance may throw in his way. And yet—with an obstinacy that shocks even himself—there are moments when he cannot bring himself to believe he is altogether hateful to her. A certain softness at times, a sudden blush, a surprised glance now and again, make him persuade himself, against his common sense, she still bears for him some of her ancient friendship.

One afternoon, walking along the road to Weston, he encounters the Major coming towards him from a sidewalk that branches towards the west and leads to Uplands, where dwell the Adairs. They shake hands, but, even at the moment of meeting, Dugdale becomes aware that there is an unmistakable cloud upon the Major's usually urbane brow.

'You have been to Uplands?' says Dugdale, because he has nothing else to say, and is too much the property of melancholy to care to make conversation.

'Yes,' absently, 'the old lady is ill again. But tell me, Clive, is it true what I have heard there, that Clarissa Carew is going to marry that fellow Haughton?'

'Have you heard it?' asks Dugdale wincing.

'Yes—the Adairs are full of it. They say it is all settled, and that they are to be married immediately. My dear boy,' says the Major, raising his hat to wipe his forehead, 'it *can't* be true.'

'It may be true,' says Clive gloomily. He is drawing aimless strokes with his stick upon the dusty road, and is feeling distinctly miserable.

'It *may*, sir!—what do you mean by that?' demands the Major irascibly; 'I tell you it *sha'n't*! it is monstrous! What! a woman like that to throw herself away upon a worthless fellow: and one who has treated her so infamously in the past! I tell you I won't hear of it. I thought Clarissa had more pride.'

'And yet I do not think she is wanting in pride,' says Dugdale.

'I don't know what *you* call it—but I, for one, wouldn't have believed it of her,' says old Hyde, growing slightly incoherent. 'I shall speak to her, and, if possible, prevent it. If I were a young man like you, Dugdale, I should make love to her myself, propose to her, and marry her under his very nose, rather than let such a sacrifice take place. But the young men of the present day,' says the Major disgustedly, 'are abominably wanting in both taste and feeling.'

'I wish I could agree with you,' says poor Clive sadly.

'As no one else will interfere, *I* shall. Nothing shall prevent me. Her father and I were old cronies, and I sha'n't stay by and see his girl make such a fatal mistake without uttering a word of warning. I must now go home and scribble a letter or two for the post, and after that I shall walk up straight to Weston, and ask her what she means.'

'I think I wouldn't if I were you,' Dugdale ventures to say mildly.

'But I shall, sir! Don't talk to me! Pouf! Do you think the anger of the prettiest woman in Europe could turn *me* from my duty? *Never!*' says the Major proudly.

Dugdale half smiles as they part company, and he continues his way to Weston. The hall door, as usual, stands wide open during the glorious August weather, and, making his way to the study where young Carew generally sits, he enters, unannounced.

At the doorway he stands motionless a moment, seeing Carew in earnest conversation with Sir Wilfred Haughton. Hearing him, they both look up, and Carew's expression changes from cold disapprobation to quick distress.

'It is only Dugdale,' says Haughton, with a curious gleam in his dark eyes, and a certain maddening sense of triumph in his slow deliberate tones. 'No, do not go away, Dugdale; you are a welcome friend here, and I have no desire to conceal from you the reason of my presence here to-day. I have come to ask Miss Carew's hand in marriage!'

Dugdale pales visibly, and his brows contract—otherwise he suppresses all outward symptoms of emotion. Then suddenly a wild determination to enter the lists himself, to declare aloud his affection for her, if only to let her see how well, though silently, she has been beloved, takes possession

of him. Almost without allowing time for reflection, he turns to Carew, and says with forced composure—

‘I too have come to Weston to-day bound on the same errand. I love your sister, Carew, and would ask her to marry me. Let her choose between us.’

George rises slowly. He is still weak, and finds a difficulty in sudden movements; a look of perplexity and discomfort pervades his handsome face; he trifles nervously with a paper-knife that lies beneath his hand.

‘You distress me,’ he says at length, addressing both the suitors. ‘I hardly know what to say. Of course I shall inform my sister of the honour you have both done her, and—and—you must abide by her decision. But it grieves me to know that one of you—must——’

He pauses, and unconsciously, in his embarrassment, fixes his eyes upon Dugdale. Clive groans inwardly: to him it is a simple matter, the translation of that regretful look, the finishing of that broken sentence. ‘One of you must go to the wall—and you, Dugdale, are the man.’ So he reads it. The brother, knowing well the sister’s feelings, had thought kindly to give him gentle warning of what is surely in store for him. That glance was an ill-omen! Well, well! He throws up his head in angry defiance of cruel fate and draws his breath a little hard.

At this moment a light and well-known step crossing the hall outside makes itself heard. It comes nearer; the door is thrown open, and Clarissa, fresh and sweet as the perfumed flowers in her hands, stands upon the threshold.

‘Why, what a solemn conclave,’ she says jestingly. ‘What long, long faces! But that the silence of the grave seems to reign, I should say you were all indulging in a battle royal. What is it, George?’ laying her hand upon his shoulder with a soft caressing touch.

Taking down the hand, Carew holds it closely in his own and regards her with silent scrutiny for a full minute. Then glancing at the two men, he says, as though decided—

‘My sister is here—she shall speak for herself. Clarissa, Sir Wilfred Haughton, and Clive Dugdale, wish to tell you—that they—love you; they have come this afternoon to ask your hand in marriage. It is for you to either refuse them both—or—make your choice between them.’

He has spoken disjointedly, but to the purpose. Clarissa, growing white as the lilies in her trembling fingers, shrinks

away from him, and letting her flowers fall, covers her face with her hands,

‘Oh! why have you done this?’ cries she: ‘it is terrible—it is cruel——’

‘No—it is the wisest course,’ whispers he hurriedly. ‘It will end at once all doubt and suspense. Believe me, it is better so—and kinder.’

Looking up, she glances first at Sir Wilfred, who is evidently anxious, but perhaps a little too assured—then timidly at Dugdale, who is rather in the background, with his head bent downwards and his arms crossed upon his breast.

Feeling the intensity of her regard, he raises his head, and meets her gaze full. In his eyes there is a world of sorrowing, a passionate regret, a dumb agony, sad through its hopeless longing.

‘Clarissa!’ says Haughton entreatingly, attempting to take her hand.

‘No, *no!*’ she exclaims hastily, waving him back, her heart beating painfully. Then, ‘Clive, will you not speak to me?’ she says, moving a step or two in his direction.

The effect is electric. At her words Dugdale starts violently, the sadness disappears, and in its place a great gleam of joy rises and illumines his face. Yet even now he hardly dares believe in his own good fortune.

Going up to her, he imprisons her hands, and asks, in a voice so changed she scarcely knows it to be his—

‘Am *I* your choice?’

‘Yes,’ faintly.

‘You *love* me, Clarissa?’ almost vehemently.

‘Yes,’ returns she again. And then, overcome by her emotion and the situation generally, she bursts into tears: whereupon Clive, unmindful of her brother’s presence, or that of his disconcerted rival, catches her in his arms, and with a sob she lays her head upon his breast.

Leaving Weston about two hours later, he has just reached the entrance gate, when he finds himself, for the second time to-day, face to face with the valiant Major, evidently bent on slaughter.

‘You see I have kept my word,’ says this warrior fiercely; ‘I am not to be frightened, even by a frown from Venus! I have come to reason with Clarissa about this talked-of engagement.’

'There is no need. *I* can tell you all about it.'

'Well?' impatiently.

'It is only too true. *She is* going to be married!'

'And who, pray, told you that pretty piece of news?'

'I had it from her own lips.'

'You don't say so!' exclaimed the Major, staggered; then, plucking up courage again, he advances a step. 'All the more cause why *I* should now interfere,' he says with much determination.

'I am afraid it will be too late. *She* and *he* seem very much attached to each other. *I* am almost sure *she* will not give *him* up.'

'*She* will when *I* prove to her what a despicable scoundrel *he* is; and open her eyes a bit about his doings in London.'

'Oh, Major! that *I* should live to hear you say such things!'

'*Say* them! *I* have said them a thousand times, and *I* shall say them again. *I* tell you this man *she* is bent on marrying is a villain of the deepest dye!'

Dugdale laughs.

'Ah! *you* may make a joke of it, Dugdale; *she* is nothing to you, of course; *you* don't care about her future happiness, poor child! but *I* do, and *I* can't see her enter on such a wretched marriage without feeling grief.'

'*I* don't think,' says Clive modestly, '*it will* be a wretched marriage.'

'*I* hope you may be forgiven,' ejaculates the Major solemnly. 'Well,' in an offended tone, '*I* shall go and fulfil my duty, and see what *I* can do.'

'Don't put an end to the engagement, Major,' exclaims Clive, in a tone of affected dismay; 'because, if you do, you will make *Clarissa*, and—and *me* eternally miserable.'

He has placed both his hands on old Hyde's shoulders, and is laughing lightly.

'Eh? What? You don't mean to say—bless me!—What have *you* got to do with it?'

'In me you behold the coming bridegroom,' says Clive, with an air of the profoundest triumph.

The Major is struck dumb for a full minute (a most unusual occurrence with him), and then gives way to a wild rapture.

'My dear Clive—my dear, dear boy, can it be true? Oh! you young scamp, not to tell me sooner. My dear fellow, *I*

am rejoiced.' And then he fairly gives way, and falling upon the unsuspecting Dugdale, treats him to a hearty hug.

'But, Major, consider! Would you wed your pearl amongst women to a "despicable scoundrel," a "villain of the deepest dye"? When are you going to open her eyes to all my scandalous "doings in London"?'

'None of your chaff,' says the Major, threatening him with his stick, 'but come straight home with me, and let us drink the future Mrs. Dugdale's health in a bumper of champagne.'

‘WHAT A MAD WORLD IT IS, MY
MASTERS!’

‘Though this be madness, yet there’s method in ’t.’—*Hamlet*.

‘MORNING, Bob,’ says Mr. Wilding, dropping into ‘Bob’s’ chambers with his usual airy grace, and sinking indolently into a chair.

‘Good-morning!’ calmly returns Bob, who looks as if he ought to be addressed as Robert, if not Bohun—his surname—which would of course be even more dignified. Briefs being new to him, and attorneys almost unknown, he glances up from his papers with a charmingly abstracted air, and just a *soupçon* of weariness, that is very well done indeed. His friend is evidently delighted with it, and smiles approvingly.

‘Used up, Bob?’ he asks with suspicious concern, after a slight but eloquent pause.

‘No—no,’ protests Mr. Bohun mildly, ‘not so much that as—of course there is responsibility attached to it, and—and that.’

‘All that,’ says his visitor with increasing sympathy, ‘I feel just like you. Responsibility is wearing me out. Conscience is killing me slowly but surely;—in fact, is making an old man of me before my time. When I saw the wretched boy at my place a few moments since, creeping and staggering up the stairs, and growing every second more damp and unpleasant beneath the load of briefs he held in both arms, I feared I might lose my senses, so I fled to you for advice; only to find you, if possible, in worse case. My dear fellow, don’t! Throw over a client or two; do *anything* except kill yourself with work.’

‘Oh! hang you,’ says Mr. Bohun inelegantly and very frivolously, looking wildly round for a ruler, or any other

seasonable missile; and then they both laugh, and dignity is no more. Bob foregoes grandiloquence and descends to commonplace.

'You know the Normans, don't you?' asks Wilding presently.

'The old people—yes; and George I used to know, long, long ago, but I have rather lost sight of him of late.'

'Ah yes. He's about the best of them. He's in a lunatic asylum now. Odd how things come round.'

'No! You don't say so. I never heard a word of it. I met the old man, Sir John, at the Gorings the other night, and he said nothing of it.'

'Well, he wouldn't, you know, 'tisn't likely,' says Mr. Wilding. 'It's a sort of "Oh! no; we never mention him"' sort of affair altogether. You see they set their affections on George—swore by him—thought he had the entire brains of the family; and when he was spun for the I. C. S. they nearly went out of their minds.'

'Did they?' says Bohun with interest. 'Evidently very excitable people; no doubt it is hereditary in their family.'

'Eh!' says Mr. Wilding, somewhat puzzled. Then—
'Well, it couldn't be helped, you know.'

'No, of course not, poor fellow,' in tones of the deepest commiseration.

'You're A1 at sympathy,' says Mr. Wilding; 'your face will certainly make your fortune in court some day. Imitation, they say, is the sincerest flattery, so don't be offended if you see me trying to copy your present expression. But I really can't see that George Norman is so much to be pitied after all. Things might have been worse.'

'Well, I confess I don't see that.'

'Oh! nonsense. I know many fellows worse off. He says himself it is rather a sunny berth, and that he is quite comfortable.'

'I'm glad to hear that. He doesn't feel his position, then!'

'One would think you were talking of a convict,' says Mr. Wilding with some contempt. 'I can tell you, in the long run his people, in spite of their absurd pride, were glad enough to get him in.'

'That's only natural, you know, though it sounds heartless. I dare say he was troublesome at home.'

'He was always a restless sort of beggar, that must be

allowed; but it was a comedown, of course, from an Indian judgeship.’

‘Well, it was—rather.’

‘At first the old people quite despised the notion of the asylum; but George was headstrong, as you may remember, and very determined; and, do you know, in the long run they had the greatest difficulty in getting him in at all.’

‘Ah! a violent case, then, I suppose. Poor George!’

‘What?’ says Mr. Wilding stupidly, and then he glances keenly at his friend, and finally gives way to laughter, that by degrees degenerates into a roar.

‘Violent!’ says he when he can speak, and then laughs again so heartily that Mr. Bohun perforce joins in the merriment, although ignorant of its cause.

‘Did you think that George was a lunatic?’ he says at length. ‘For a small part I declare you are better than Toole.’

‘You said he was in a lunatic asylum. What would anyone think from that?’ demands Mr. Bohun, slightly aggrieved.

‘So he is, but not as a patient. He is Doctor of the Southway Asylum. I thought you knew that. What brought me here to-day was to bring you an invitation to a ball at his place. I met him yesterday, and it appears he is giving his mad friends a dance. I said I had never seen an affair of the kind, so he asked me to get rid of my ignorance without delay, and when I mentioned your name (I was afraid to go by myself) he said he’d be awfully glad to see you also. Will you come?’

‘I will,’ says Bohun briskly. ‘I should rather fancy renewing acquaintance with George. He was always a very decent fellow.’

‘With uncommon pretty sisters——’

‘That enhances his value threefold,’ says Mr. Bohun approvingly.

The first feeling that fills the breasts of Mr. Wilding and his friend as they enter the ball-room at Southway is one of distinct disappointment. It is very much like any other ball-room; there is no denying this sad fact; our friends acknowledged its truth with a sigh and a secret sensation of surprise and dissatisfaction.

They had expected something widely different; something with a touch of burlesque about it here and there that would

have made it stand out conspicuously from amongst the common ruck of entertainments. They had fondly looked for a festival that might resemble in a mild fashion a meeting of the Feejee Islanders, or a war dance amongst the Red-shanks; and after all they find themselves gazing at a ball that is as nearly as possible similar to an ordinary West-End affair.

Naturally, therefore, they are a little downhearted and inwardly aggrieved. Everything is strictly *en règle*. The flowers, the lights, the music that is swelling and throbbing through the rooms—are all irreproachable. The whole scene is familiar to them; they have been through it a thousand times before. Mr. Bohun, growing supercilious, puts his eyeglass in his eye, and looks vaguely round him.

'Really, it is very difficult to know who is mad and who isn't,' he says aloud, and Mr. Wilding, who is at his elbow, assents wearily. Yes, it is all very disappointing.

Of course there are a few eccentric blots in the perfect picture; but they are not numerous, and may be counted on the fingers of one hand. There is, for instance, at the upper end of the room a lady clad in the costume of the Bohemian girl, as she appears in Mr. Balfe's opera. She rejoices in three parti-coloured petticoats, worn one over another in successive degrees of shortness, which, if odd, is certainly picturesque. That is, the petticoats are; their wearer, though undoubtedly odd, fails dismally in the picturesque. The fact that she is a gaunt spinster of fifty-five, with a gigantic nose and spectacles, rather spoils the effect. When in her sane mind, I have no doubt she would have shrieked at a Bohemian, and quivered with indignation at a short petticoat; yet now, poor soul, she goes about, harmlessly enough, assuring everyone she is a prima donna, and telling them what a success she had at Drury Lane last night she sang, and how Her Majesty was there, and how the Shah of Persia flung her a bouquet studded with gems. 'Yes, my admiring friend, *studded with gems.*'

At the other end of the room stands another blot, evidently trying to sink out of sight. He is a young man of unmistakably gentle breeding, but clothed in the roughest of rough garments. Dr. Norman, coming up behind our two friends, points him out.

'Look at that man,' he says; 'it is very sad about him, poor fellow! He is heir to a baronetcy and eight thousand a year, and a lovely place in Yorkshire, yet he insists upon it

that he is an artisan, and will speak nothing but the broadest Yorkshire dialect.’

‘That accounts for his coat,’ says Wilding.

‘Yes. To-night, nothing would induce him to get into his dress clothes. He said a person in his position would be uncomfortable in them. He is very uneven in his temper; and we hope we may make a cure of him yet. Now go and dance with whom you please. There are several pretty women in the room. Don’t flirt too much, but humour them—humour them!’

‘We can’t be accused of turning their heads, that’s one comfort,’ says Wilding, ‘misfortune having done that already.’

So they separate, and Bohun, moving slowly, somewhat listlessly, from wall to wall, watches curiously all that is going on around him.

Half an hour later, standing with his back to a door, his eyes fall upon a young and very pretty girl, sitting alone upon a couch at some distance from him. Her hands are folded on her knees, her eyes are wandering slowly down the crowd beyond her. She is dressed in some filmy robe of black, a little open at the neck, through which her skin shines with dazzling fairness. Her sleeves are cut short to the elbow, so that her arms, soft and rounded as a child’s, can be half seen.

Bohun is attracted, and gazes at her intently; there is something about her mouth, which is firm yet very tender, that reminds him of some one—whom, he cannot call to mind. Yes, she is very pretty—more than pretty, downright lovely; when Mr. Bohun comes to this point, he raises himself from his lounging position, and crosses over to the couch on which this fair divinity is seated. It is with some faint feelings of apprehension he takes this step; lunatics, however beautiful, not being altogether to his taste.

‘Seeing you alone,’ he begins respectfully, ‘I thought perhaps you would let me come and talk to you for a little.’

The distraught beauty turns her head, and regards him speculatively—perhaps a trifle nervously—before replying.

‘Oh, certainly,’ she says then, in a very sweet voice that has a plaintive ring in it.

‘Thank you,’ says Bohun gratefully, seating himself beside her. Glancing at the room generally, he says presently, with a view to making conversation—

‘This is rather a gay scene, is it not?’

‘Very,’ says Beauty.

'You are fond of dancing?'

'Yes,' says Beauty, always with an air of reservation.

('Evidently of the monosyllabic order,' thinks Mr. Bohun; 'not demonstrative at all events, I thank my stars.')

'Then why are you not dancing?' he asks gently—*very* gently, lest he should rouse a sleeping demon.

The pretty maniac pauses a moment, as though to consider her answer, and then says naively—

'Because nobody has asked me.'

'What a shame!' says Bohun. 'One can hardly believe it. Perhaps,' with some hesitation, 'you will give me the pleasure of——' He half rises from his seat as he speaks, but at his words his companion shrinks visibly, and puts up one hand in a manner almost beseechingly.

'Oh! thank you, *no!*' she says, regarding him with something like horror in her eyes. 'I should much prefer not. Do not,' entreatingly, and just a little soothingly, 'think me rude, but I assure you I should much rather sit still.'

'As you wish, of course,' says Bohun, reseating himself. ('Doesn't know her own mind for two seconds together, poor soul,' he tells himself pityingly, and knows he is devoutly thankful to her because of her refusal. To talk to an insane young woman is one thing, to dance with her is quite another.)

'Besides,' says the pretty girl with rather a forced smile, and plainly with a desire to conciliate, 'you see I haven't been introduced to you. I don't even know your name.'

Here Mr. Bohun remembers George Norman's advice to humour them—so by way of humouring this particular patient he says blandly—

'I am the King of the Cannibal Islands!'

'Ah!' says Beauty gravely. She regards him attentively for a moment or two in her slow pretty fashion, and then goes on, 'Your Majesty has done me a great honour; I had no idea I was conversing with Royalty.'

'Well, one mightn't think it certainly, to look at me,' says Mr. Bohun modestly, 'but the fact remains.'

'I should rather fancy your people must be troublesome. I shouldn't think you have much of a time with them,' says his companion timidly.

'You are right,' says Mr. Bohun, 'but that arises principally from the reason that I am seldom amongst them;

their attentions are a little too pronounced for my taste, so are their meals. Even when I do visit them it don't seem to signify; they don't trouble overmuch; and of late years I have noticed that the levées grow smaller and smaller. You see, they have a rather playful way of making themselves scarce, specially in famine times, and it is pretty nearly always famine times.'

'Poor people!—how their poverty must distress you!' says Beauty.

'Not so much as you might imagine,' says Bohun: 'as I told you before, except on very rare occasions, I don't inflict my society upon them.'

'Why?' with interest.

'Lest they should make me scarce too.'

'Ah!' says the lovely lunatic, so comprehensively that Bohun for a little while stares at her reflectively. Then he says gently—

'Now I have told you all my private affairs, don't you think you might confide a little in me? May I ask your name?'

She lowers her eyes and hesitates perceptibly, after which she says with gentle dignity—

'I am the Queen of Hearts!'

'Indeed!' says Bohun with a quick smile, 'you amaze me! I did not know there was a Queen in the room, and such a Queen! After all, it was no common instinct drew me to your side. "Like inclines to like," you know, and "birds of a feather——"'

"Gather no moss,"' says the Queen of Hearts unsmilingly.

'Quite so,' replies Mr. Bohun, though perhaps at this moment he is a little—just a little—at fault. Again he stares at her meditatively. Certainly she is a very able lunatic.

'Your kingdom is a larger one than mine,' he says presently.

'It is universal,' returns her Majesty mildly. 'It grows every hour.'

'It has certainly grown within the last hour,' replies he; 'you have made a fresh conquest. Will your Majesty deign to enrol me as a new subject?'

'You!' with a laugh full of amusement, and a vivid blush, 'so soon! Oh, it is impossible!'

'It is quite possible. I would be, not your subject, but your slave,' says Bohun, warming to his work, and insensibly moving a degree nearer to her.

At this unexpected movement on his part, the fair Queen shows signs of fear. She pales visibly, and casts an anxious look around her. Then, shrinking from him, she makes a quick gesture, suggestive of instant flight.

'Have I offended you? Surely you are not afraid of me?' asks Bohun reproachfully.

'Oh! no, no. It is not that,' murmurs she faintly; 'only, you are—so—impetuous. The fact is, I cannot speak to you—if you—stir!'

Her fingers clasp each other nervously. There is a good deal of unmistakable fear in her large blue eyes.

('Hysterical!' thinks Mr. Bohun, 'very flighty, and unsettled, poor little thing!')

'Very well,' he says, 'then I sha'n't stir; but at least relieve my anxiety. Tell me you do not reject me, that you will accept me as a subject.'

'Of course I accept you. Why should I not? Only a moment since I confess I felt a little frightened; remembering where you came from, I half thought you were going to bite me.'

'It was a most natural thought,' amiably; 'but reassure yourself; it is so long since I have tasted human flesh, that I have almost lost my zest for it. I promise faithfully I sha'n't take a bit out of you, at all events.'

'Remember, a royal promise can never be broken,' says the Queen earnestly.

'I shall remember it,' replies he.

Then ensues a slight pause, broken at length by her.

'Have you been long here?'

'Not very long.'

'I imagined that. Your face is strange to me.'

'Yes. I sha'n't stay long either. I am leaving very soon, so perhaps we shall never meet again.'

Is it fancy, or does a look of infinite compassion fall into her lovely eyes at these words? She is gazing at him, sadly, wistfully, as it seems to Bohun; then the eyes are lowered, and the look is gone.

'Have you been here any time?' he asks in his turn.

'Yes, nearly three weeks. I do not like it. I, too, am going away to-morrow.'

Bohun regards her silently, and surely the pitiful look that a moment ago darkened her eyes has wandered, and shines now out of his. (‘Always to-morrow, I suppose; pour soul!’ thinks he, ‘and to-morrow never comes.’)

‘Then perhaps we *may* meet again,’ he says with an assumption of gaiety he is far from feeling; ‘in the great world beyond these gates we may come face to face some day. When we are free, I shall ask one of your other subjects the way to my Queen’s palace, and then I shall lay my homage at your feet. May I?’

‘You may,’ replies her Majesty, a wonderful softness in her tone. Then she murmurs something he cannot hear, and rising makes him a graceful inclination of her pretty head, and vanishes amongst the crowd.

When she is quite gone, Mr. Bohun draws himself up with a deep sigh that has something of impatience in it.

‘What a life!’ he says; ‘I should go raving mad myself if I saw much more of it. I wonder how Norman can stand it! That poor pretty creature! it is the saddest thing I ever saw. Her beauty! her vain longings for freedom! It is horrible.’

With this he too leaves his seat, and makes his way towards Wilding, who is standing at a little distance, evidently lost in contemplation of the elderly prima donna, who is discoursing in somewhat noisy fashion with a very mild old gentleman.

Reaching Wilding, Bohun comes to a standstill; while almost at the same moment a young lady, creeping in a timid manner through the throng of dancers, gains Dr. Norman’s side, and with a sigh of relief slips her hand through his arm. Bohun’s back being turned towards her, he does not see this young lady.

‘Well, where have you been all this time; been enjoying yourself?’ asks Mr. Wilding.

‘Hardly,’ with a shrug. ‘It is all too much like a nightmare for my fancy. You don’t catch me coming to this sort of thing again in a hurry. It is melancholy to the last degree.’

‘It is interesting,’ says Mr. Wilding.

‘It may be to *some* people. Not to me.’

‘What misfortune has befallen you?’ asks Mr. Wilding, turning to regard his friend curiously. ‘Has anyone molested you, or made a playful attempt to cut your throat? You look rather down on your luck.’

'I have been talking to one of the prettiest girls I ever saw,' says Bohun. 'And—she was mad.'

'A faint drawback, certainly. Pretty, you say?'

'Lovely. She had the sweetest eyes in the world. And the oddest part of it was, she didn't look in the least out of her mind. It was only her conversation. She told me, for instance, she was the Queen of Hearts.'

'That was very frank of her,' says Mr. Wilding. 'Anything else?'

'Not much.'

'Did she ask your name?'

'Yes. I told her I was the King of the Cannibal Islands.'

'I didn't think it was in you,' says Mr. Wilding, with calm but ardent admiration. 'Of course the poor lady was gratified at finding herself in the society of one of her own rank. The idea was full of delicacy.'

'I talked to her for a long time. Then she left me, somewhat abruptly—but that was to be expected, you know. By Jove!' says Mr. Bohun excitedly, 'there she is!'

'Where?' turning with some faint show of interest to gaze exactly in the wrong direction.

'Not there, my dear fellow; over there—standing close to Norman. Don't you see her?'

'Who?' says Wilding, betraying the liveliest consternation. 'Do you mean to tell me you told that young lady you were the King of the Cannibal Islands?'

'Yes,' says Bohun, 'why not?'

'Well,' says Mr. Wilding, surveying his friend with growing delight, 'you've about done it this time, at all events. That lovely lunatic of yours is Miss Norman: George's youngest sister!'

Mr. Bohun is conscious of a cold chill, that seems to pervade his entire system, rendering him almost faint.

'If this is one of your jokes,' he says to his friend sternly, with a last supreme effort at composure, 'I must say I consider it rather ill-timed.'

"On this occasion only," my dear fellow, you have the joke all to yourself,' replies the friend, with what appears to Mr. Bohun brutal enjoyment of the situation. 'I give you my honour she is as sane as you are, and—unless she was married since last night—her name is Norman.'

'Wilding, remove me. Take me anywhere out of this,' murmurs Bohun feebly, taking his companion by the arm.

'No place like the supper-room for a case like yours,' says Wilding, preparing to lead him thither.

Meantime Miss Norman having, as already related, gained her brother's side, says in a little panting whisper—

'Oh! George, how glad I am to be near you again. In spite of all my efforts to the contrary, I confess these poor people frighten me horribly.'

'You are nothing but a little goose, Carry,' says her brother, patting her hand, 'and I am quite disappointed; I fully thought you would have enjoyed it.'

'Well, so I do, dear, immensely. I have been having quite a lovely time. A young man—a very splendid lunatic—did me the honour to converse with me for half an hour, during which time he made violent love to me.'

'I should like to have seen your face,' says George; 'who was he?'

'I don't know. That was the funniest part of it. I thought I knew all your patients, but I suppose he is a new arrival. He is young, about twenty-nine, very handsome, and doesn't look the least bit mad.'

'I wonder who it is you mean,' says George thoughtfully.

'He called himself the King of the Cannibal Islands,' explains Miss Carry.

'Ah! That puzzles me even more. I didn't think I had a king in my establishment.'

'He is tall, gentlemanly, and, as I told you, exceedingly handsome. I quite liked talking to him. Once, indeed, he grew a little *empressé*, and then I was frightened, but on the whole he behaved wonderfully well. I assure you I rather liked him than otherwise, and I was so sorry for him, poor fellow.'

'I can't think who on earth it is,' says George, bewildered by this flattering description.

'Why, there—there he is!' cries Carry excitedly. 'Just going out of the room with Mr. Wilding. Don't you see him? Look!'

'Eh?' says George, and then ensues an ominous pause. George's lips relax—they widen—quiver—and presently Miss Norman becomes aware that her brother is convulsed with laughter.

'What is it?' she asks a little austere. 'No one likes being laughed at. What is amusing you?'

'You,' says George, still continuing his heartless mirth, 'and your new patient.'

'Well, *isn't* he mad?' impatiently.

'We are all mad, my dear, no doubt, on different subjects, but as yet that young man you have just pointed out to me is loose upon the world.'

'George, what do you mean?' asks Miss Norman, in a terrified tone. 'Who is that young man?'

'He is a rising barrister, of good family and small means, and his name is Robert Bohun,' replies George in a voice full of open amusement.

'Oh! George, do say you are not in earnest,' entreats his sister, almost in tears. 'I have said the most dreadful things to him—I have made myself quite ridiculous—I told him I was the Queen of Hearts!'

At this George laughs still more immoderately.

'What shall I do?' says Miss Norman. 'Dear George,' coaxingly, 'I think I should like to go to my room.'

'Nonsense, child, come and have a glass of champagne instead. After all, what does it signify? I'll find Bohun and introduce him to you, and you can both laugh it all over in five minutes.'

'Introduce him!' indignantly; 'I wonder how you can even suggest such a thing to me. Of course I shall never be able to look him in the face again. My only hope is, that he and I have seen the last of each other to-night.'

'Well, come and have your champagne, anyhow,' says George; and Miss Norman, still so distracted as to be almost unaware of what she is doing, suffers her brother to lead her to the supper-room, where, to her everlasting chagrin, she finds herself face to face with the King of the Cannibal Islands!

Carry comes to a stand-still, and Mr. Bohun puts down untasted the glass he holds. They stare at each other silently, and both turn a warm crimson. To Miss Norman this accession of colouring is eminently becoming; to Mr. Bohun it is not. He is quite aware of both these facts, and feels himself at a disadvantage.

As for George and Wilding, they are beginning to enjoy themselves thoroughly. Their eyes are gleaming with unholy joy. It is with difficulty they suppress their secret gaiety. The former, coming to the rescue at this moment, says with gentle gravity—

‘Carry, permit me to introduce to you one who for years has been to me a true and valued friend, although he can boast a royal pedigree, whilst I am only a humble commoner. True, his people hail from the South Sea, and are hardly choice with regard to their food, but that cannot be placed to his account; it is his misfortune, not his fault. His family name is Bohun, his title is Hoky-Poky-Winky-Wum——’

‘Norman!’ interrupts Bohun angrily.

‘His modesty forbids my dwelling on his manly perfections,’ continues George, utterly unabashed. ‘But before leaving the subject, Bohun, I should tell you my sister is also of blood royal—she is, in fact, the well-known Queen of——’

‘George!’ exclaims Miss Norman severely.

‘Well, I shall say no more,’ says Norman; and then he and Wilding give way to much unseemly merriment, and taking each other by the arm, march off to a distant table.

‘I hope you will forgive my wretched mistake, Miss Norman,’ says Bohun, when he and Carry are alone. ‘I’m sure I can’t think how the absurd idea got into my head, but I was positive you were a—a——’

‘So was I—of you,’ says Miss Norman rather incoherently, with downcast eyes. But Bohun happily understands.

‘I’m awfully ashamed of myself,’ continues he earnestly. ‘I really think I *must* have been mad, when—when I thought *you* so.’

‘So must I,’ murmurs Miss Norman, growing more incoherent; and always with her lovely eyes cast down.

‘I hope I am forgiven,’ says Bohun anxiously.

‘I hardly think there is anything to forgive,’ with a low half-nervous laugh, and just one swift glance from under the long dark lashes; ‘I think we have both sinned equally. When I remember all the absurd things I said to you,’ putting up her hand to her soft flushed cheek, ‘I feel so angry with myself. But I didn’t mean them. You must understand that.’

‘Of course I understand that,’ says the young man.

‘I wish you would promise me to forget all about this dreadful evening.’

‘I shall do my best, but there are some things one cannot forget. You told me, for instance, that when we were both free of our asylum I might call upon you. I can’t forget that, you know. And there were a few other things I don’t want to forget either.’

'Oh! but I really wish you would,' says Miss Norman, 'that is—some of them—the "other things" I mean'—confusedly—'indeed, perhaps it would be better if you forgot everything.'

'Oh! don't say that,' says the young man.

'And all I said about the hearts'—with another glance from the beautiful violet eyes—'you must have thought me so foolish, so conceited, but I didn't mean a word of it. The only heart I have in my possession is my own.'

'Are you quite sure it *is* in your possession?' asks he, even more earnestly than he is himself aware.

'Quite sure,' replies Miss Norman, examining her fan with interest.

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It is a glorious day towards the close of the London season. Outside, beneath the hot rays of the brilliant sun, the heat is almost insupportable; but within, where Miss Norman is sitting in her pretty drawing-room, with all the blinds pulled down, and a soft little breeze sighing in and out through the half-opened windows, it is almost cool.

Miss Norman is dressed in a charming morning-gown—all pure white—that clings close to her perfect figure, and suits her *à merveille*, with a good deal of lace, and just a suspicion of black velvet, at the throat and wrists. She has some fanciful bit of crewel work between her fingers, but it can hardly be said to grow beneath her hands. She is alone (Lady Norman, her mother, having gone to sit for an hour with her eldest daughter and the new baby), but from the expectant manner in which her eyes seek the door every now and then, and the little impatient sigh that sometimes escapes her, it is evident she does not anticipate being long so.

It is rather more than two months since that memorable evening when she and Bohun first met. Two months, in which endless balls, dinner and garden parties, operas, and small and earlies, have done their appointed work. Perhaps, indeed, the small and earlies have the most to answer for. At all events, Bohun in this short time has lost his heart irretrievably to her, which hardly makes her the richer, she having given away her own.

There is a knock at the door—a short silence—then a quick step upon the stairs. Miss Norman, taking up the neglected work, evidently throws her whole soul into its com-

pletion, and stitches away diligently. Then the door opens, and Bohun is announced.

‘You!’ says Carry, rising with a smile and a glance of well-feigned surprise, although in reality she has been waiting for this moment for fully half an hour.

‘Yes, I was anxious to know how you were after last night’s fatigue. I needn’t ask, however; you don’t look in the least done up.’

‘No. Dancing does me good. But how very thoughtful of you to call!’

‘There is nothing very remarkable about that,’ says Mr. Bohun. ‘You know I am always thinking of you.’

‘Well,’ says this hypocrite blandly, taking no notice of his sentimental remark, ‘it was a pity you didn’t put off your visit for another hour. Mamma has gone to see Lizzie, and now you will miss her.’

‘Has she really?’ says Bohun; but the news doesn’t seem to afflict him very severely. On the contrary, it is with a decidedly more cheerful air that he puts his hat away, and then draws his chair a little nearer to Miss Norman’s.

Then ensues an animated conversation, in the course of which Mr. Bohun imparts a good deal of information. His cousin has died quite suddenly in Florence. He is the next heir. He has come in for the title, and all the money and that. Miss Norman is charmed—delighted—she congratulates him with all her heart. ‘It must be so nice to be a Baronet, you know, and——’

Then the voices grow lower and lower, until at last they cease altogether. When the conversation was begun they were seated, now, as they get to this point, they find they are both standing. Miss Norman is very close to a *jardinière*, and Bohun is very close to Miss Norman.

‘And I think you love me a little too, Carry—don’t you?’ asks the young man anxiously, taking her hand with very becoming diffidence. Miss Norman’s other hand is trifling nervously with the leaves near her; she makes no immediate reply. Her eyes are lowered.

‘On the night when first we met,’ says Bohun, ‘you told me you would accept me as your subject. I have not forgotten that. You were a queen then—you are always a queen to me—and you told me also a royal promise could not be broken. So yours ought to be sacred. You will accept me, Carry? You will marry me?’

'I don't want you as a subject,' says Carry. 'I made a mistake.'

'Oh, Carry!' says the young man, with keen reproach in his tone; so keen that Miss Norman involuntarily raises her face to his, and lets him see the tears that are dimming her pretty eyes. At this he is so far encouraged that he encircles her with his arm, whereupon she lays her head very contentedly upon his shoulder.

'Would you have a queen wed her subject?' she asks, with a little flickering smile, although the violet eyes are quite drowned by this time.

'I would,' says Bohun with decision.

'It would never do,' says Carry. 'No,' in a little soft whisper, 'if you *insist* on marrying me, you shall not be my subject—you shall be my king!'

'I shall be both,' says the young man very earnestly.

THE BABY.

‘A simple child.’—WORDSWORTH.

SHE was the bonniest, sweetest, most lovable child in the world ; quick, and lithe, and fairy-like. In many small points she differed from other children of her age ; she seldom misplaced her words, and held all infantine abbreviations of dissyllables in contempt. From her lips, every now and then, dropped little rounded pearls of speech that made those wonder who heard : while she had a fine love of getting at the root of matters, that raised within her people mingled feelings of admiration and awe.

At times they vaguely doubted whether she were not in reality ninety instead of barely four years old. But her clinging arms, and dewy kisses, and sweet innocence assured them of her youth. They adored her, as was only natural, coming as she did thirteen years after they had all decided Nina was to be the last—bringing with her so much grief and trouble ; for as she came the mother went, and so it happened that the wee delicate bairn was flung upon a cold world, with only four growing girls to tend her, and sympathise with her joys and woes.

Their father, always a recluse, grew daily more and more taciturn and sedentary, as month by month rolling by only made him miss more hopelessly the companionship of her who had been to him all in all. Only ‘the Baby’ could bring a smile to his lips. Only her soft fingers could by their touch coax back the old peaceful look to his face.

But that her nature was too true for spoiling, she would have been utterly and irretrievably ruined before her first year had ended. None of those about her dared oppose her slightest wish, so that she tyrannised over the entire household, from the ancient and cross-grained butler down to the latest stable-boy, unrebuked.

But Liliás, pretty, stately Liliás, was her chief joy : gentle Liliás, with her crown of golden hair, her dark deep eyes, her lissome, graceful figure. None of them came so close to the Baby's heart as this her eldest sister ; and all her tiny riplots of discontent, and still wilder waves of wrath, were ever quelled by the low sweet voice of Liliás, that rang like silver chimes.

Their name was Heriot, and they lived near a tiny village, insignificant and unknown. Three miles from them was a town rejoicing in a railway station and (what its proprietor was pleased to name) a railway hotel. This latter was usually in a state of stagnation, but one evening in midsummer two young men, apparently fagged, broken-hearted, not to say ill-tempered, took pity on it, and leaving the station just opposite, walked into its best parlour, and sank upon its horsehair chairs.

'Any use in ringing the bell?' asked the elder of the two, whose name was Lord Farnie, casting a helpless glance around.

'Try,' replied his companion sulkily, who was evidently further gone in the blues than his friend.

Lord Farnie tried. A cracked bell tinkled in the distance. There was a long pause.

Outside a few geese cackled unpleasantly ; inside all was as silent as the palace that held the sleeping beauty. The sun, as yet untired, poured its golden rays through the many-paned window ; the door opened slowly, sleepily, and a waiter appeared.

'Waiter,' said his lordship languidly, 'what can we have?' while his friend standing at the window gazed moodily down upon the courtyard beneath.

'Fowl, sir, cold joint, cutlets,' replied the waiter in a sing-song tone, wipping some imaginary dust off the nearest chair.

'Cutlets,' said his lordship plaintively, his eyes fixed upon a faded cobweb that hung with much dejection from the ceiling ; 'cutlets in a village inn. Fred, do you think cutlets would be safe?'

'Don't know, I'm sure,' said Fred disgustedly. 'It would more than half depend on the state of the fire ; perhaps they have no fire ; on the whole, I should say not.'

'Then we have no resource but to fall back upon the fowl or the "cold joint,"' said his cousin, 'and I don't think I like

"cold jint." Waiter,' as though suddenly inspired, 'do you believe the presiding genius in your kitchen could cook a rasher, and fry with it two fresh eggs?'

'Oh, make it four when you are about it,' said Fred impatiently; 'I dare say I'm as hungry as you are.'

'Very good then, waiter, we will make it four, and as many rashers as her frying-pan can conveniently hold. You think she knows how to serve it properly?'

'I really can't say, sir,' said the indignant waiter, throwing as impertinent an intonation into his voice as he dared; 'we ain't in the habit of rashers in this house except at breakfast. But if she *can* throw her mind into 'em at this hour, I dessay you'll get 'em.'

'I like that fellow,' said Lord Farnie when the man had disappeared; 'there was an insolent twinkle in his eye that I specially admired. Yet I don't think he likes me. Odd that one possessed of——'

'There, don't moralise,' said Fred brusquely, 'but tell me what induced you to stop at this beastly hole.'

'An inward craving——'

'Nonsense! when we were within five miles of our destination——'

'My dear fellow, don't lose your temper because you have chosen to come down here,' said his cousin cheerfully, changing his glass from his right eye to his left. 'I wish myself safely out of it quite as much as you do, but I never lose my temper. Firstly, because I haven't got one to lose, and secondly, because it is bad form. I own I think Ashburnham far preferable to Linwood, but what will you? Here we are, and here we must remain at all events for a few days.'

'I hate compulsory visiting.'

'So do I. But when a man has been civil to one in a hundred little ways, and then makes a point of getting one to promise to spend some time with him, it don't do to refuse. That's about it, I take it. So let us put a good face on the matter, and be festive under adversity.'

'You're right,' said Fred laughing; 'but old Conroy don't catch me accepting any more of his little civilities in a hurry, if this is to be the price of so doing. I have a morbid horror of small towns and eccentric gentlemen. I suppose Linwood is a torn-down place, without the common necessities of life. I sha'n't stay there three days.'

'Perhaps it is a palace,' said Lord Farnie. 'At all events,

we may as well go and see it now, or we shall be late for dinner and turn your "eccentric gentleman" into a ravening beast.'

They rose and went.

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The next morning awoke calm and smiling; and deepening into full-grown day, showed itself one of summer's brightest and gayest efforts.

On her own doorstep stood Lillas Heriot ready equipped for a walk; she called to the Baby to hurry, and presently the little one broke from her nurse's grasp and ran to her with hand outstretched. Together the big and little sister went up the avenue under the limes, and out of sight.

Their walk for a short while was peaceful, and full of such intellectual converse as can be derived from 'Mother Hubbard' and 'Puss in Boots.' But when they entered old Tom Conroy's wood—now glowing and swelling with the pride of its rich and bursting charms—they turned aside and took a higher flight into the land of fantasy, and discussed such topics congenial to the scene as 'Goldenlocks' and poor 'Red Ridinghood.' Presently the Baby, tiring of bloody jaws and fiery, wicked eyes, raised her head on high, and became enamoured of some white blossoms in the tree above her. They were sufficiently beyond reach to make them madly desirable.

'I want *them*,' she said, with a healthy disregard of grammar.

'But they are so far away from us that I fear we must do without them.'

'I won't,' said the Baby; 'I want them, Lily—get them for me.'

'But, darling,' expostulated Lily, who always would follow out an argument with children, instead of telling them, as wiser people do, to be silent, or that 'little folks should be seen and not heard'—'But, darling, it is impossible; and remember what happened to Goldenlocks when she went wishing for what was not meant for her. See, these yellow flowers here are far prettier.'

'I don't care for them, and I don't care for Goldenlocks either,' pouted the Baby. 'Those up there are better—I want those—if Jerry was here,' reproachfully, 'she would get them for me.' Geraldine was her second sister.

‘But Geraldine is so much taller than I am, and even she could not reach them without climbing.’

‘Then climb,’ said the Household Tyrant promptly.

As, when she uttered this terrible command, the big tears stood in her azure eyes, Liliás gave in. Placing one foot upon a projecting branch, she essayed to climb, and just as she did so a young man, forcing his way through some laurel shrubs hard by, came—himself unseen—upon this charming picture—

A little maiden standing with frock outheld to catch the hoped-for blossoms, a bigger maiden, with intent look, showing amidst green leaves.

When Liliás had raised herself two yards from mother earth, she stopped short and glanced down ruefully at her own miniature beneath.

‘Now, Daisy, what is to be done?’ she said. ‘I have caught my foot in some awkward way, and am as far from your flowers as ever. How shall I get down?’

Here the young man came a few steps nearer, and stood hat in hand, hesitating, hardly knowing how to proffer aid. Daisy saw him first.

‘Oh, *he* will get them for me!’ she cried gleefully—with all the selfishness of childhood, forgetful of the wounded foot. ‘He is taller than Jerry.’

‘I shall be very happy to do anything,’ said the young man, taking courage, and speaking to Daisy, while his eyes were fixed upon a crimson face a little way above him. ‘Are these the flowers you want?’

He made a spring, brought them branch and all to the ground, and laid them in the tiny maiden’s arms. Then he turned to Liliás.

‘Now may I assist you?’ he said, with a half smile.

‘Thank you,’ said Liliás, smiling too, but gravely, as became her position. ‘That child induced me to place myself in this predicament; and my foot,’ trying to stir it, and making a faint grimace, ‘my foot has forced itself into this hollow—and—ah!—’

‘You are hurt. I am sure you are hurt,’ said the young man anxiously—‘place your hand on my shoulder, and try to turn it. There! now it is released. Is it painful? Do not use it for a moment, but let me help you down.’ Then very softly: ‘Do you permit me?’

He attempted to put his arm round her; and as Liliás

just then was making a trial of the wounded member, she uttered no protest. He took her in his arms, and placed her lightly on the ground.

‘Does it pain you?’ he asked.

‘No—not much—it will be nothing,’ said Liliás, colouring again. To her, if not to him, the situation was altogether new and strange. ‘I hardly feel it now, thank you so much.’ She bowed somewhat distantly, and would have gone away, but the child Daisy ran to him and caught his hand. ‘Good-bye,’ she said, and, while still having a tight hold of him, went on with what had been puzzling her for some minutes.

‘Why did you put your arm round my Lily?’ she asked.

‘To help me out of the tree,’ interposed Liliás, troubled but outwardly calm. She felt what was coming.

‘Oh!’ said this terrible infant, pausing. Then questioningly, ‘When Bob puts his arm round you, he always kisses you—but *he* didn’t kiss you,’ with a reproachful glance at the stranger: ‘*why?*’ (Bob was a distant cousin.) It was too much. Sir Frederic Ashurst burst out laughing; not only laughed but roared, and in a minute or two, when she had had time to recover the shock, Liliás laughed too.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said presently, with much contrition; ‘I know I should not feel amused, but I cannot help it. You must forgive me. Good-bye, little Daisy, I am glad I was able to get you your flowers. Good-bye.’

Just then his cousin appeared, sauntering leisurely towards them.

‘There you are, Fred!’ he said; ‘I have been looking for you everywhere.’ Then he stopped and glanced curiously at Liliás, and put his hand in a puzzled way to his hat.

‘I have had an adventure, Farnie; I have been happy enough to do good service to a little wood-nymph,’ said Sir Frederic, smiling at Daisy; then he turned to Liliás and said frankly: ‘I have no card about me, but I should like to introduce myself; I am Frederic Ashurst, and this is my cousin, Lord Farnie, and we are staying at old Tom Conroy’s; and—you are Miss Heriot, I fancy.’

‘Yes—I am one of the Miss Heriots,’ said Liliás, smiling as frankly.

‘And we live in the big grey house down there,’ broke in the hospitable Baby in her high sweet treble: ‘Won’t you come to see us? and bring me more of those pretty white

flowers—and I will show you my squirrel, and my bow-wow, and my dolly.'

'If I may,' returned Ashurst, directing appealing eyes at Lillas, 'I should like to call this afternoon to inquire about'—with a desperate guess at the relationship—'your aunt's foot.'

'It is quite well,' said Lillas coldly; then, seeing his face fall, her conscience smote her, and she added, 'But if you do call, I am sure—papa—will be glad to see you.'

She bowed first to Lord Farnie, and then to him, bestowing a gracious smile upon the former, while not deigning to raise her eyes to the latter, and drew the child away.

'Good-bye,' called the Baby, nodding at them over her shoulder. 'Come soon. And she is not my aunt at all—she is my mammy.' So it ever pleased her to designate her sister Lillas.

That afternoon they called, and then the next day, and then the day after that again; and I think it was the day after that again that it first dawned upon the Heriots that Sir Frederic Ashurst was in love with their Lillas.

It also dawned upon Lord Farnie. So that when a full week had gone by since their arrival at Tom Conroy's, and still his cousin showed no desire for departure, in spite of his vehement protestations on the subject before coming, he made his way one night to Fred Ashurst's room and spoke as follows:

'I can stand it no longer,' he said; 'I am off to-morrow; it is insufferable. Nothing shall induce me to come here again.' To-night he told me all over again that story about Sympkin's oxen. I wish Sympkin was dead, and his oxen too; I shall go. Will you come with me, Fred?

'It might look rude our both going together, don't you think?' said Ashurst evasively. 'Better for me to stay a day or two longer.'

'Ah, just so,' said Farnie with a smile; 'what a considerate fellow you are, Fred! and what uncommon pretty girls those Heriots are!'

'Very—though I don't quite see what that has to do with it.'

'No more do I, but I think I like the eldest one best. She is in very truth a lily. I wonder,' provokingly, 'how you can prefer Miss Geraldine!—though I own she too might rout

many a London belle. If I stayed here much longer I should lose my head—as it is—— Did you ever see anything so fresh and sweet as her smile when she gave me that rosebud yesterday? It has haunted me ever since.'

'Of whom are you speaking—of Miss Heriot?'

'Yes, of Liliás. She gave it—the rosebud, I mean—with such perfect grace.'

'I dare say you asked her for it.'

'I did certainly, nay, I begged for it, and—got it. She has the prettiest eyes I ever saw, somewhat like a cow's when chewing the cud.'

'I would not be coarse if I were you,' said Fred coldly.

'Coarse! my dear fellow, far be it from me. Can there be anything more peacefully pensive than the expression of a cow when chewing the cud of sweet and bitter meadows? The study of Nature, I doubt, has had no charms for you, else you would understand and appreciate my simile. I beg pardon if I have offended her, or you: I had no idea it had gone so far. What will the mother say? How shall you explain to Diana?'

'I don't follow you,' stiffly; 'I know of nothing that requires explanation. And even if I did, I know no reason why I should choose Diana as my mother confessor.'

'I thought you were engaged to her,' said Farnie, flicking a small fragment of cigar ash with great care from his coat-sleeve.

'Engaged! nonsense! Of course I am not engaged to her. I believe my mother and hers have often spoken of a marriage between us as a thing that ought to be, considering how the estates lie, but I have never uttered a word of love to her in my life, and never shall, for various reasons—one of the chiefest being that were I to do so she would not listen to me.'

'Ah! that being so, I wish you luck with Miss Liliás,' said his lordship, rising. 'Good-night, dear boy; it is just as well I am leaving to-morrow, as I was fast losing my heart to the *beaux yeux* of your love.'

He left the room hastily, without waiting for a rejoinder, but on the corridor outside he paused, and his whole expression changed and softened.

'So!' he said, 'I am glad to know that of Diana. I shall chance it with her, on my return from the North. She is handsome, *distinguée*, and can hold her own. She likes me,

I fancy, and—ah!—really I do believe I like her too—uncommonly!’

So he left; but Sir Frederic lingered on at Linwood until time had grown into a month.

It was night; but night as light as day: so pale and brilliant were the moonbeams, so faint and shadowy was the veil that lay upon the land.

Lilias stood in her rose-scented garden alone, her hands clasped loosely behind her, her eyes fixed upon the tiny stream that gurgled at her feet.

She had plucked her rose, and now watched it floating away from her leaf by leaf upon the water’s bosom, leaving behind it an assurance sweet as the touch of lips forbidden.

‘He loves me,’ she whispered dreamily, her fingers still pressing the last kind petal. ‘He loves me,’ she repeated with a long-drawn happy sigh.

‘He does, he does,’ murmured a voice close beside her in trembling accents. ‘Oh, Lilias! but do you love him?’

For all answer she turned and laid her soft pinked-flushed cheek to his.

It was a wonderful thing to the Heriots, to hear that Lilias was going to be married—and to Sir Frederic Ashurst. She would have a title—she would be My Lady Ashurst—it was as good as Cinderella.

Their father was pleased, but puzzled. For the first time, as he saw one of them preparing to leave the home-nest, it dawned upon him that they were no longer children. He approved of the engagement, but shrank from naming any immediate day for the wedding.

‘Time, time,’ he said to Frederic, ‘give me time. You rob me of a dear possession, and expect me to rejoice over it. You are going to Scotland for the grouse-shooting: well, when you return we will talk over it.’

‘Then I shall return immediately,’ said Fred laughing; but so it was arranged; and after a few more days of lovers’ raptures, Lilias and he bade each other a sad farewell, ‘and kissed, and kissed,’ and parted.

Four weeks alone were to separate them; but when he had been gone barely a fortnight, it so happened that one day a carriage drove up to the Heriots’ door, and from it alighted

an elderly lady, short but resplendent, whose features—as Lily gazed upon them from an upper casement—did not seem to her altogether unfamiliar.

She begged a private audience of Mr. Heriot, and being shown into the library, where he sat reading, made him a present—according to his daughters' calculations—of one hour of her society.

By the time the school-room clock chimed two all four girls were nearly mad with a suppressed desire to know ; and when the stranger had departed, and Liliás of them all was summoned to the mysterious apartment she had so lately occupied, their excitement knew no bounds.

Half an hour more dragged slowly by, and then Liliás came out with uncertain steps into the hall, where they stood awaiting her. Her face was as death, her very figure had lost some of its pretty roundness.

'Liliás !' they cried, catching hold of her, 'Liliás ! what is it ?'

'Nothing,' she said in a low voice, twisting her slender fingers in and out, with a fierce effort at composure. 'Nothing—only—he is engaged—he was engaged all the time—to his cousin, Diana Fairfax.'

She went from them up the stairs with swift steps, whilst they—stupid with rage and grief—stood below and mutely watched her.

Presently they knew it all. The lady who had been closeted with their father was Lady Ashurst, Frederic's mother, and she had come to tell him of her son's engagement to his cousin, Diana Fairfax. They had been betrothed for years, she said, with the consent of both families. She had heard accidentally of his imprudent conduct with Miss Heriot, and had hastened to inform Mr. Heriot, for the good of all parties, of how matters really stood.

Her son's honour was in his hands : would he not restore it to him unbroken ? Was this sudden fancy for Liliás to lower him for ever in the eyes of his world ?

She was an adroit old lady. Of course, as she put it, she showed if possible more consideration for Liliás than for her son. Mr. Heriot, cold and calm, gave her an assurance that, as far as he and his were concerned, her son should be regarded as though he had never been amongst them.

'But as for his honour'—he paused, and then went on—'it is not in my keeping ; and—I know not where it is.'

It was the only unkind insinuation he allowed himself.

Her ladyship, well content, withdrew.

'And now,' said Mr. Heriot severely that same evening, 'let me never again hear that young man's name mentioned in this house. He is dead to us. Let us all remember that.'

He did not look at Lillas, who sat quiet within the embrasure of the window, her knitting in her hands, her fingers moving swiftly, her eyes bent down.

'Should anyone,' went on her father sternly, 'receive a letter from him, I desire it shall be returned to its false sender, without an answer, and unopened.'

He paused. They all sat round silent, frightened. Lillas alone was calm. She looked up bravely.

'You shall be obeyed, papa,' she said without a tremor in her voice, and left the room.

A shadow fell upon them. Nina and Gertrude were crying silently. A heavy sigh broke from their father. These were the only sounds that came to them through the gloom. Was the father thinking of her who should have been there now to soothe and comfort her stricken child?

'Papa!' murmured a little troubled voice from out of the semi-darkness, 'papa!'

Five small fingers tightened upon his; he lifted the child in his arms, and as he pressed her almost passionately to his breast, two large tears fell upon her upturned face.

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After this a good deal of the laughter of their lives went from them. Not that they were altogether unhappy; but they had an uneasy feeling that at any time something further might crop up, as a sequel to poor Lily's story. Still, they took whatever amusement chance threw in their way, and to the outer world were as they had ever been.

Lillas herself appeared utterly callous and unconcerned. At times, so perfect was her indifference that a vague feeling of disappointment oppressed the others, as they asked themselves whether indeed the love that had seemed so real could be put aside and forgotten as entirely as though it had never existed. But in this they wronged her.

About a fortnight after the preceding events, and just about the time when, if all had gone well, Fred might have been expected home, someone in their neighbourhood gave a ball.

The Heriots went to it, and Liliás throughout the evening was almost feverishly gay. With pained astonishment her sisters watched her. All through the drive home she chattered, and laughed, and jested with them, and with their chaperon. But when at length the journey's end was reached, and the friendly bedroom door was closed against intruders, she flung herself upon the floor with a low, agonised groan.

'I cannot bear it any longer,' she said to Geraldine—they occupied the same room—'it is killing me; will it never end? Oh! to sleep only to wake to it again, that is the horror of it.'

'Liliás!' cried Jerry, bending in dismay over the slight white heap upon the ground. 'Darling, this is dreadful. Surely you are not still thinking of——'

'Yes, I am,' she said doggedly; 'I am always thinking of him—I never cease thinking of him—I wish I was dead. Oh! if I could only see him again, only once, perhaps I might bear it better. But to have no good-bye, no last word—and the pain in my heart for ever burning—burning——'

'Lily—Lily,' called a plaintive voice from the dressing-room, in frightened sleepy tones, 'Lily!'

It was the Baby awakening from a dream of bogies, and calling to her favourite mother to come to her aid. How could she refuse the entreating accents? She rose wearily but hastily, and, going to the small crib, took the child to her breast, and holding it so, and crooning over it and soothing it, soothed, too, at the same time, her own poor wounded heart.

The next morning Mr. Heriot received a letter the writing on the envelope of which turned pale Liliás paler still. It was from Fred, and declared his intention of coming forthwith to her home to learn in person the cause of the strange silence to which he had been subjected.

A little thrill of excitement ran through the household. Liliás's lips refused to speak—she sat silently awaiting her doom. And when her father came in and said she was to go to her grandmother's for a month or two, she acquiesced quietly and made no protest.

To go to her grandmother's was like going to execution, because she was a dreadful old woman, and was vehemently detested by every one of the girls. She had a hateful habit of always calling a spade a spade, and would not hesitate about playing upon one's weak point.

However, Liliás gave in without a murmur, and packed her things in a methodical, miserable sort of way that nearly broke Geraldine's heart; and when Daisy had squeezed a beloved but dilapidated doll, and half a gingerbread cake damp with tears into her pocket, she stepped into the carriage and drove away to the railway station.

'I give strict orders,' said Mr. Heriot, to the three who remained behind—taking no heed of Daisy, who sat shrivelled up in a corner 'like Niobe, all tears'—'I give strict orders that if that young man—Sir Frederic Ashurst—calls, none of you give him any information about Liliás's present abode.'

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She had only been gone two days, when, as Geraldine sat moodily working in the drawing-room, she chanced to raise her head, and there outside the lower window stood Frederic Ashurst.

He lifted the sash, and vaulted lightly in.

'Well, here I am again,' he said defiantly, before she could speak. 'And what is all this that has happened during my absence? An engagement spoken of that was never an engagement—the whole world dead against me—and Liliás hidden away! What is the meaning of it?'

'You have behaved shamefully,' cried she with rage, 'hatefully, and I wonder you dare show your face here again. No engagement, indeed! when your own mother came to this house and spoke to papa about it, and was as rude as ever she could be, and——'

'It was not an engagement,' he persisted angrily. 'There was Diana, and there was I, and because our estates joined, two or three old women put their heads together and decided we should marry each other, whether we liked it or not. She is four years older than I am; we grew up together; I would as soon dream of marrying my sister, and she would not have me if I asked her.'

'Your mother said you were engaged to her,' replied she obstinately, running the point of her needle across the linen she was working, so as to make a creaking, aggravating noise, 'and I, for my part, believe her.'

'She—made herself misunderstood.' Then, hotly—'Am I a blackguard, to come here and try to win your sister's affection when promised to another woman? My mother has wished so earnestly and so long to see me married to my cousin that

she has brought herself to imagine her wish fulfilled. It was all a mistake—a fatal one. And then my letters,’ he said with agitation, ‘rejected, unanswered; and I alone left in the dark as to the real cause. It was unjust. And now, when I have come down here without an instant’s delay to explain to her, I find—you will tell me where she is, Geraldine?’

‘No! indeed I will not. Even if I would, I could not, as I have promised papa faithfully not to do so.’

‘It is madness. Such promises are better broken than kept.’

‘Oh! We all know how lightly *you* regard your promises,’ muttered she viciously.

‘What has come to you, Jerry?’ asked Fred, his tone changing. ‘You used to be the best little girl in the world, and now you treat me as though I were the veriest scoundrel the world contains. What have I done to you?’

‘What have you done?’ cried she, tears in her eyes and voice. ‘What have you *not* done? You have upset our whole lives. You have made Liliās—the dearest, sweetest darling upon earth—miserable; you have driven her from her home; you have destroyed our peace, and now you ask what you have done. I wish,’ exclaimed she, waxing wroth, ‘I had never heard your voice—I wish I had never seen you. I hate and detest you with all my heart—so, there!’

‘Thank you,’ said Fred stiffly. ‘I have not taken away your breath, at all events. Do you refuse to tell me where she is?’

‘I do, distinctly.’

‘Very good, then I shall find out for myself; it is only a question of time.’

A patter of tiny footsteps—a ringing, joyous laugh. The door was flung widely open, and the Baby came in.

‘Ah, Freddy, Freddy!’ cried she rapturously, and, spreading out her arms, she came flying up to him, her exquisite golden fleece floating behind. ‘You have come back—I knew you would; and now my Lily will come too. How glad she will be! I know she hates staying with grandmamma.’

‘Daisy!’ Jerry broke in vehemently, ‘do not speak of Liliās. I forbid you to mention her.’

But he had her in his arms, and was gazing at her, compelling her by the very fixedness of his look to answer him.

‘Go on,’ he said with authority. ‘She is staying with grandmamma—*where*?’

‘Yes, at Marley, in Surrey,’ said the child in a troubled tone, glancing first at him and then at Jerry. ‘Marley Hall—did you not know? Have you not been to see her? She always said you would come to see her the very first thing when you came back. But that was before she left.’

‘So I will,’ cried Fred ecstatically, straining the child to his breast. ‘The very first thing, indeed. Oh Daisy! Daisy! what a debt I owe you! My poor Lillas, she at least believes no evil of me.’

‘Daisy, what have you done?’ exclaimed Jerry desperately; and then to him: ‘if you take advantage of what that child said, you will be——’

‘Take advantage of it!’ repeated Fred, with his old gay laugh. ‘*That* I shall, and before the sun goes down. Good-bye, Jerry; try to think more kindly of me. It is unpleasant to be on bad terms with one’s brother-in-law. What shall I bring you from London, Daisy?—a doll?—a very big doll?’

‘Oh, will you?’ cried the Baby, clapping her hands. ‘And will it open and shut its eyes? *Cécilia*,’ in a half-whisper, ‘has one that nods, and says “Mamma.”’

‘You shall have one that says “Mamma” and “Papa” too,’ said Fred decidedly. ‘Good-bye, my best friend,’ kissing her. ‘You shall have your doll.’

‘And Lily too?’ called the child.

‘And Lily too,’ returned he gaily.

.

In the drawing-room at Marley there was consternation. An ominous yellow envelope lying upon the ground had brought them news that raised within them feelings of indignation and fear. In one poor heart it had raised hope. George Heriot had sent his mother warning of the approach of his daughter’s false lover.

Lillas sat apart: Lillas, with flushed cheeks and bent brows, and small feverish hands, tightly interlaced, lying upon her lap. No one heeded her—except, perhaps, uncle Charles.

Old Mrs. Heriot sat in judgment. Her mittened fingers had in them a world of determination. She was in her most awful mood, and chose the centre ottoman as her throne. With the first finger of her right hand she proceeded to lay down the law.

‘It is indecent,’ she said, ‘neither more nor less, to perse-

cute us in this way. In my young days, no gentleman with any claims to distinction would have so forgotten himself. But the youth of the present day are sadly wanting. What does he mean by this intrusion ?’

‘Well, perhaps it is only natural his wishing to come here, under the circumstances,’ said uncle Charles from the background, with a glance at Lilius, he and his elder brother being both present.

‘Natural !’ frowned uncle John. ‘When a man is openly engaged to one woman, what right has he to go philandering after another ? Answer me that. If he has the impertinence to show himself here in this house, after his dishonourable conduct, I shall——’

‘I don’t believe it was very much of an engagement,’ said Charles. ‘There was something about another man——’

‘Charles !’ interrupted his mother severely, ‘cease any excuses. The young man has behaved abominably. No more need be said on that subject.’

‘I certainly did hear she was going to marry that lord,’ said Charles unrebuked.

There was an awkward pause, but Lilius neither raised her head, nor seemed to hear.

‘Just let him come here,’ said uncle John viciously, ‘and I shall give him my opinion of him in pretty strong language.’

‘You shall do nothing of the kind,’ said Mrs. Heriot with decision. ‘No son of mine shall address him one word. Does he imagine we—the Heriots of Marley—sought an alliance with him ? He shall never enter my doors. I shall give strict orders to Tapes that, if he comes, he may not be admitted.’

Just at this auspicious moment the door was flung violently open, and a young man, dusty, travel-stained, handsome, stood upon the threshold. It was her hero, her Prince Charming, and Lilius rose to her feet with a little wild, half-suppressed scream, and held out her hands.

‘Lilius !’ he cried, his whole heart in his voice.

For a moment she tottered, then rushed forward—past them all ; past grandmamma’s frown, past uncle John’s detaining grasp—right into her lover’s arms.

There he held her, close against his heart. They did not speak, they scarcely breathed ; but they kissed each other passionately, lingeringly, forgetful of all, of everyone, but he of her, and she of him.

Then she lifted her head, and smiled, and sighed—a long, long, happy sigh—and knew that she might dare the world.

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Of course there was a terrible fuss made about it just at first, and a general chorus of indignant ‘Noes.’ But when Diana’s marriage with Lord Farnie appeared in public print, and when old Lady Ashurst not only wrote but came in person to entreat the grandmother to use her influence with her son to induce him to give his consent to Lilius’s marriage with Frederic, dissent became weak, and finally died out altogether.

So they were married three months afterwards, and it was a very grand wedding; and Lilius looked lovely; and there never was such a beautiful doll in all the world as the Baby got from London.

THE DILEMMA.

Brought out at the St. James's Theatre under the title of *Medusa*.

PUGGLEMORE having sprung into existence on a site both high and dry was consequently healthy. It was full of old men. Indeed, so liberal was the supply, one might have formed a real and efficient 'chorus' out of them.

There was old Mr. Blount of the Manor, and old Sir James at the Park. There was old Mr. Grant at the Grange, and old Mr. Jones at the Rectory; and so many more besides that were I to bring them before you you would say I was a writer of fiction, instead of a true and authenticated tale.

Of those I have mentioned the two former were fast friends. They had the same pursuits, the same ideas, and very much affected each other's society.

They were naturalists—or thought themselves so—it makes little difference. What was a commonplace butterfly to you was something else to them, and went by an intolerably long name. The longer the name, the more learned they felt themselves, and in this, perhaps, lay the gist of the whole matter.

They were harmless, not to say delightful, old gentlemen, and had in reality warm hearts—though to inspect their studies, where rested the trophies of their chase in the form of mangled insects, one might be forgiven for doubting it—but unfortunately they had one settled conviction impossible to shake.

They looked upon marriage as an institution of the evil one! They viewed each new-born babe with a groan! They listened to an account of the most satisfactory wedding with a dolorous sigh!

Sir James had a large income and a handsome nephew; Mr. Blount a comfortable rent-roll and a lovely niece. Both these children, being orphans, were dear to the old men's

hearts—dear as the apple of their eyes; so dear, that they had decided long ago on keeping them single all their lives, so as to protect them from the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,’ that must of necessity wound those unlucky ones who, for want of a warning word, slipped into the shoals of matrimony.

One evening, whilst in a genial mood over their port (both the victims being present), they openly disclosed their intention; whereupon young King raising his eyes met Clarissa’s full, and there and then decided he loved her with all the fervour of an impassioned soul; while Clarissa Blount—Clarissa dropped her eyes demurely, blushed crimson, and on the instant felt for Pelham—well, all that a modest maiden *should* feel for a strictly eligible young man. Both old gentlemen were bachelors, and the Park was entailed.

Though, to do Clarissa justice, I think just then she thought more of Pelham King’s *beaux yeux* than of all that the Park could give her.

She was a very pretty girl, of medium height, with irreproachable hands and feet. She was slender, *piquante*, charming; in a word, *chic*. Pelham was tall, with a fine figure; and if not exactly handsome, was undoubtedly good to look at. They seemed made for each other. The very estates over which their respective uncles reigned (and which at their death should in common fairness come to them) were joined for several miles. Nothing could be more satisfactory; and yet these wretched old gentlemen, through a mistaken sense of duty, had pronounced their veto against all love-making, and would not so much as sanction that most disagreeable of all things, a lengthy engagement.

As often as Clarissa and Pelham had hinted at their mutual attachment, as often had their hints been received with an air of non-comprehension maddening to endure. Sir James King and his friend would none of it!

At last matters came to a crisis, and young King and his *fiancée* determined to make a stand once for all. They vowed they would face the lions in their dens, and receive either consent to their union or the reverse from their hard-hearted relatives. They arrived at this decision after much deliberation and inward misgivings, because the uncles were obstinate; and to voluntarily resign five thousand a year goes against human nature. The Park was entailed, but the Manor was not.

‘Nevertheless, I shall speak,’ said Pelham.

‘Do,’ said Clarissa, with a doubtful sigh.

And he spoke.

The hour he chose to make his important demand was the breakfast-hour, in which, I think, he made a mistake, as I have always noticed that people are either in the dumps or in a downright rage in the morning, and it is only when the sun has heated the day that geniality may be said to have set in. However, Pelham, whose heart was near his lips on this occasion, could not wait on prudence, but declared offhand and earnestly his desire to wed with Clarissa Blount.

‘Married!’ said Sir James, in a voice of horror largely mingled with contempt. ‘Have I heard you aright, or have my ears deceived me? *Did* you say you wished to get married?’

As he said this he got up from the breakfast-table, leaving the savoury morsel of toast he had reserved as a *bonne bouche* upon his plate—forgotten. He himself kept his face well-shaven, and Nature had done so much for his head, leaving only two insignificant tufts on either side of his skull. When angry or annoyed (which, to do him justice, was frequently) he would run his hands through these tufts, compelling them to stand upright, as though ordering them to come to his assistance. He did so now, and Pelham knew the battle had begun.

‘I certainly did say so,’ returned he quietly, while struggling with an inclination to laugh.

‘And to that senseless chit, Clarissa Blount! Never, Pelham, *never*! You shall never marry Clarissa; you shall never marry *anyone*.’

‘But, my dear uncle, I must, and shall.’

‘You *shall*, sir, when I say you *sha’n’t*? Have I reared you for seven-and-twenty years to hear you say *that*? Do you think I don’t know what is best for you? Matrimony is a mockery, a delusion, and a snare. Avoid it! Put it out of your head!’

Pelham was standing with his back to the fire. He had entire possession of the hearth-rug. This is a proud position, and gives one a decided advantage.

‘To oblige you I would do almost anything,’ he said courteously; ‘but unfortunately I cannot put Clarissa out of my *heart*.’

‘I am not speaking of your heart, sir—keep her there, by all means—but put matrimony out of your *head*.’

‘But I am fond of Clarissa, and she—is fond of me. We feel we could live together comfortably for any number of years. But without matrimony—— You will excuse me, Sir James, if I say your suggestions are somewhat *broad*, to say the least of them.’

‘Broad—nonsense! you know what I mean. Forget this young woman. Be a sensible boy. Go in for science, as I do, and be happy.’

‘I don’t think it would make me happy,’ said Pelham reflectively, trifling with his eye-glass. He liked to think himself short-sighted. ‘I confess I don’t care for—for—*grub*—of the sort, at least, that you mean—and I *do* care for Clarissa. I am sorry, uncle, but I feel almost sure I shall marry her, whether you like it or not.’

‘You defy me!’ cried the old gentleman fiercely, speaking in such loud tones as argued well for the strength of his lungs. ‘You rely, perhaps, upon the entail. But know, sir, I shall cut you off; I shall leave you a beggar—I shall *marry*, sir!’

Pelham played with his watch-chain, but made no reply, unless an irrepressible smile might be considered one.

‘Ha, you smile!’ went on Sir James, growing every moment more frenzied. ‘You think, perhaps, I could not get a young and charming wife at my age. But I am not so old, sir, let me tell you—I am not so old as *you* seem to think.’

‘Old, my dear sir! On the contrary, I think you a wonderfully young man—for your *years*. I feel assured any young woman in the country would gladly accept your hand—any, that is, except Clarissa. Knowing my wild infatuation for Miss Blount, I put you on your honour not to interfere with my hopes in that quarter.’

So saying, he beat a hasty and politic retreat, leaving Sir James actually foaming over this last and crowning piece of impertinence.

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Meantime, Clarissa, having screwed up her courage to the sticking-point, had broken her wishes to her uncle, and had been pool-pooled vehemently.

‘Tut,’ said Mr. Blount, ‘I am surprised at you, Clarissa. Do you think I would allow anything so disgraceful as a wedding in my house? Nonsense, my dear; you should

know better. Besides, I care for you too much to sanction your committing such a *bêtise* as matrimony.'

'But, dear uncle, I—love Pelham.'

'Folly, child! *All* girls love their would-be husbands beforehand, or think they do. But does it *last*? I ask you, Clarissa, as a reasonable being, *does it last*? Look at the Smackbys and the Bangleys! Are not they all at loggerheads? While it is a matter of fact that the fireirons at the Clashers' are commonly reported to be worn out, so constantly are they used by the master and mistress for offensive and defensive purposes.'

'But, uncle, I am sure I should never take the poker to Pelham; and I know dear Pelham would *die* rather than exercise the tongs on me.'

'Perhaps—perhaps. But you would nag at each other in six months, and I know no weapon so hurtful as the tongue. Be content, Clarissa; stay here. At my death you shall inherit, not only all my money, but—in a low and deeply impressive tone—'my *collection*! I promise it—I swear it. Do not doubt my keeping my word.'

'Oh! uncle—'

'No thanks, my dear—not a word. It is priceless, I well know; but you have been a good girl in most ways. Give up this foolish idea. Devote yourself to Nature and all its glorious gifts. Scale the rocky mountains in search of fresh beauties! Roam through the woods in pursuit of the wandering bee! Grope in the earth after the wriggling worm! Prowl through brakes and uplands for the wary butterfly! See, Clarissa—drawing her excitedly towards a large cabinet full of drawers, all carefully marked and docketed—'see, you shall have even *this*—a rarity—a creature as yet unpossessed save by *me*!'

As he spoke he showed her a huge, unsightly insect, glutinous and leggy, safely impaled.

'*This* shall be yours,' he said in a slow and solemn tone.

'I don't want it,' said Clarissa. 'Horrid ugly thing! I would rather have one kiss from Pelham than the whole of them put together!' She said this vehemently, with a pout, and an unmistakable show of tears.

'Out, unhappy girl!' cried Mr. Blount, shutting up his cherished trophy with a bang suggestive of indignation. 'You are bewitched—besotted. But for your own sake you must be cured of this infatuation.'

‘I don’t want to be cured,’ said this perverse girl, with a forlorn sob, and a rush of tears that ran all down her pretty cheeks; ‘I only want to be *married*.’

‘Never, with my permission.’

‘You are a monster to refuse it,’ said Clarissa passionately.

‘Leave the room,’ returned her uncle with considerable force. ‘Go!’ And as she obeyed him he turned back again to his adored possessions, murmuring in high disgust, ‘She must be lost—lost! To compare my priceless discovery with an obnoxious *kiss*—faugh!’

Pelham, hurrying through the wood in search of his beloved, encountered that young lady presently, seated on the top of the stile. That was their usual trysting-place. The tears were still wet upon her cheeks; she was altogether most disconsolate. Pelham was scarcely less so.

‘You have bad news,’ said he, when he had given her a lover’s greeting.

‘*Very* bad,’ with a dolorous sigh. ‘And you?’

‘Nothing could be worse.’

‘Oh, yes, dear, mine *must* be, because he may leave the Manor to whom he chooses; while you at least are safe, the Park being entailed.’

‘That is all very well,’ said Pelham ruefully; ‘but unfortunately Sir James has decided on taking to himself a young and blushing bride; and where shall I be when the son and heir appears upon the scene?’

‘*He marry!*’ said Clarissa; and then, in spite of herself, she burst out laughing. And Pelham joined her, and presently their mirth grew to such a pitch that they nearly fell off the stile.

‘It is the best thing I ever heard in my life,’ said Clarissa, wiping her eyes.

‘It may be, but it is true, nevertheless. You should have seen his face when I put him on his honour not to propose to you. I am sure he will marry. You know how obstinate and persevering he is, and how unlikely to give in.’

‘What *shall* we do?’ said Clarissa.

‘Marry,’ said Pelham. ‘If the worst comes to the worst I have always that five hundred a-year inherited from my mother. It is a comedown from thousands, I grant you.’

'It is,' she said thoughtfully, her chin resting on her hand.

'Do you shrink from it?' asked he, a suspicion of disappointment in his tone.

'For your sake, yes,' raising her clear eyes to his. 'For me, I should be as happy with you on five hundred as on five thousand a-year, and you know it. But will *you* never repent, or think of what you have lost?'

'How dare you utter such heresies?' said he, pinching the little shell-pink ear nearest him. 'For the future I forbid you to harbour such unholy thoughts. With you for my portion I shall be always *rich*. Besides'—laughing—'the Temple of Fame is still open to me.' (For several years he had enjoyed the proud position of a briefless barrister.) 'Who knows but I shall sit upon the Woolsack yet?'

'Not unless you reform, you idle boy.'

'With you for my Mentor I shall undoubtedly become a brilliant member of the Bar: I feel it—I know it,' said Pelham, with exaggerated excitement. 'I shall astonish the natives before I die.'

Much refreshed by this distant hope, they parted tenderly and went home.

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Pelham was right. Sir James's threat was by no means an idle one. Incensed to an unusual degree by his nephew's disregard of his express commands, he seriously and deliberately made up his mind to punish him by cutting him off from all chance of ever gaining the property. To achieve this end he would even sacrifice himself. And, with his thoughts full of his coming marriage, he sallied forth in search of his trusty friend John Blount.

Half-way he met him hurrying towards the Park, and instantly there followed a rush of confidences, terminating in Sir James's fixed resolution to get a wife without loss of time.

'*A wife!*' cried Mr. Blount, in a tone of the liveliest horror, while he turned, not so much pale, as a delicate green—because his complexion inclined that way.

'Yes, yes, yes!' said Sir James testily, deciding not to notice the other's dismay, 'I shall punish him, sir, I shall punish him. He shall learn not only what it is to offend *me*, but the difference between five hundred and five thousand a-year. I shall marry, sir, instantly.'

We are all human ; therefore all selfish. Mr. Blount had by this time arrived at the knowledge that it was his friend, not himself, who was to be made unhappy. There was great comfort in the reflection. And after all the naughty pair certainly ought to be made to feel their conduct ; and if Sir James really didn't mind, and if—and if——

'Nothing too young, I suppose ?' he said, with a deprecatory cough.

'No, certainly not a *child* ; and yet—nothing too old either. Just a nice disparity. You will understand, because it is to you, old friend, I leave the task of finding a fitting bride.'

'I shall do my best. But—pause, James, pause before you irretrievably ruin your——'

'I shall *not* pause,' said Sir James irascibly. 'I shall teach him his duty even at the risk of my own peace.'

'To-night I shall think over every woman I have the misfortune to know,' replied Mr. Blount, seeing it was vain to argue, 'and you shall hear my opinion to-morrow.'

So they parted.

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Now, Pugglemore, although rich in old men, was poor in maidens—that is, young ones. Of spinsters on the shady side of forty it could, however, boast a considerable few. Of this latter class Miss Jemima Grant was a very principal feature. In the beginning of this story I mentioned Mr. Grant, but I did *not* mention Mr. Grant's sister, which was a mistake, as she was by far the finer man of the two. Miss Jemima was the sister.

Nature had moulded her on a large scale. She was strong in mind and body ; specially in the former. She had small eyes and a huge mouth, and was remarkably nosy. Her ears were of luxuriant growth ; her cheek-bones inclined towards her eyes. Her hair—such of it as grew on her head—was sparse and ill-favoured, but elsewhere it sought to make up for its deficiencies, as on her chin flourished as thriving a beard as any young cornet might be proud of. Altogether, she was not prepossessing.

She was the terror of her brother, with whom she resided. He was small and harmless, with a passion for gardening, especially kitchen gardening ; and spent most of his days superintending the growth of such vegetables as contribute to the comfort of the inner man. His great hobby was

cucumbers. Fortunately Miss Jemima had not seen fit to interdict this amusement.

She had a large fortune entirely at her own disposal; and, strange as it may appear, it was on her Mr. Blount settled as a proper bride for his friend. She was thrifty, he argued; not quite forty; a fine woman, who might still be the mother of several heirs; and—and—would do as well as another.

To do him justice, he had spent a sleepless night before coming to this conclusion. But once come to it, he assured himself she would be the right woman in the right place. Perhaps he thought the better of her because Mr. Grant and he were chums and had been boys together, and he had seen a good deal of Miss Jemima in his young days. And her nose had been shorter then and her temper longer, and the beard had not put in an appearance.

Or perhaps he thought of her because just then he was writing to her brother about some wonderful cucumbers, the seeds for which he had procured, and was anxious to share. However it was, when he had finished his letter to Mr. Grant, he took up another sheet of paper and wrote to Sir James, advising him strongly to make Miss Jemima Lady King.

Just as he had finished his writing Clarissa opened the door and came in. Her eyes were red, but her carriage was undaunted.

‘Writing, uncle?’ said she with perfect good-humour, though there was a little malice in her grey eyes. It was customary with her to read and sometimes write all her uncle’s correspondence, so he now thought nothing odd of her leaning on his shoulder and deliberately conning both the letters as they lay beneath her on the table innocent of envelopes.

She smiled as she read about the cucumbers.

‘How funny it does sound,’ she said, ‘and how queerly you express yourself! You should always let me write for you.’ And then she read the letter about Jemima.

‘Poor Sir James!’ she said softly. ‘I wonder if she will bring *all* her pigs and that awful old pony with her to the Park? Shall I fold them up for you, dear? You seem busy. What! going to write again? You will be over-fatigued.’

Then she folded the letters neatly, put them in their envelopes, and laid them before Mr. Blount.

‘Direct this to Sir James,’ she said.

And he did so.

‘And this to Mr. Grant,’ she said.
And he did likewise.

The next day rose calm and smiling, giving no hint of the fearful storm with which it was to close.

Sir James and his nephew, who ever since their rupture had not been on the sweetest terms, came down to breakfast unconscious of the bombshell that lay upon the breakfast-table.

The post was in, and rested on the silver salver in the very centre of the cloth, as was the custom at the Park.

It was a small post—so small, indeed, as to consist of one letter only. It was addressed to Sir James, and was directed in Mr. Blount’s straggling writing, that resembled nothing so much as the dying struggles of one of his own defunct grasshoppers.

‘Hem!’ said Sir James uneasily, feeling rather frightened as he remembered his friend’s promise to write and let him know his decision.

Taking up the letter, he adjusted his spectacles—with so much care as suggested a desire on his part to delay the fatal moment—then opened it and read.

He read it once. He read it twice. Three times he read it. His face grew a dusky red; his knees shook; he tried to clear his throat, but a choking gasp alone came.

At last he could endure it no longer.

‘Read that,’ he said, flinging the epistle across the table to his nephew, and thereby breaking his vow never again in life or death to address him of his own accord.

Pelham, putting his eye-glass in his eye, read out loud as follows:

‘Manor, Monday, 14th, 1877.

‘My dear Sir,—After the last conversation we had together, you will be glad to hear that I have, without doubt, found the very thing that will suit you. I will describe to you what I mean in concise terms, and you can let me know if it is what you require. The name is Beaconsfield—very prolific; of a beautiful dark green skin; black spine; and a very small neck. These are the principal beauties. Pray let me know if it pleases you.

‘Faithfully yours,
‘JOHN BLOUNT.’

‘Cucumbers,’ said Pelham to himself, who was something of a gardener ; but seeing his uncle’s agitated face, and being naturally desirous of revenge, he held his peace.

‘Well!’ said Sir James, in a very agony of suspense.

‘I confess I don’t understand it,’ returned Pelham, turning the letter round and round with a fine show of bewilderment.

‘Not understand it? What do you mean by that, Pelham? After all the education I have thrown away upon you, you calmly tell me you don’t understand the Queen’s English! I *insist* on your understanding it, sir. In what light does it strike you?’

‘Well, perhaps it might be styled a little indecent,’ said Pelham slowly. ‘I presume he alludes to the—a—lady you intend marrying; and in doing so he mentions her *spine*. I don’t wish to impugn either the good taste or the moral character of your friend, Sir James; but how on earth *could* he know the colour of her spine?’

‘You are a *fool*!’ roared Sir James. ‘Don’t you see it is a gross piece of impertinence? He thinks to make a jest of it. Because I am not a young jackanapes such as—such as you——’

(‘Thank you.’)

‘I am to be made a butt of. But I’ll let ‘em see——’

‘I really do not think the thing savours of a *jest*,’ said Pelham seriously, regarding the unlucky note again. ‘It seems quite *bonâ fide*. There is no accounting for tastes. Who knows? Mr. Blount himself may have a fancy for black spines, and small necks, and—and all the rest of it.’

‘Hold your tongue, Pelham.’

‘I will, sir. I am sorry I offend you; but you asked my opinion. And yet, my dear uncle’—pausing on his way to the door, and speaking in a solemn tone—‘I do not believe I am doing my duty by you unless I entreat you earnestly to hesitate before imperilling the whole happiness of your existence by placing yourself in the power of a person rejoicing in a—black spine!’

He sank his voice to a whisper, and closed the door with some precipitancy behind him.

Two hours later Mr. Blount rushed in, white and terror-stricken; whereupon ensued an awful scene. But everything paled before the news he brought.

Miss Jemima had read the letter addressed to her brother—but meant for Sir James—and which so unluckily and mysteriously had got into the wrong envelope. In it Mr. Blount had not described her in exactly glowing language, and the result may be imagined.

She had instantly despatched a note to him desiring him to meet her *without fail* at Sir James King's house that day, at two o'clock precisely, as she had 'something to say to both gentlemen.'

'It is positively awful,' said poor Mr. Blount, with tears in his eyes. 'I wrote of her in such a way as—as—I certainly would not care for her to see. I said something to the effect that you need not mind her beard, as there is now a famous capillary powder warranted to remove the stoutest crop of hair in five minutes. Oh! oh! What shall I do?'

'On your own head be it,' said Sir James cruelly. 'What! did you imagine I would wed with a Tartar like that? Man, you must have taken leave of your senses.'

'You desired me to write——'

'But not of her.'

'Well, there is no use in quarrelling about it. I said in that letter that, as you were on the look-out for a wife, she would suit you; and of course, having read it, she will insist on being Lady King.'

'Never! She shall walk over my dead body first!'

Here Pelham and Clarissa (who had accompanied her uncle to the Park, seeing him almost deranged, and being in truth a little frightened at the mischief she had done by displacing the letters) entered the room, and were instantly taken into confidence by both old gentlemen.

'See what he has done by extreme carelessness,' said Sir James severely.

'How can I make reparation?' asked the other penitently, seeing the new-comers rather against him.

'By marrying her yourself,' declared Sir James solemnly. 'She has always had a *penchant* for you. You can now redeem your stupidity by coming to the front and wedding her.'

'For *me*—a weakness for *me*!' indignantly. 'And how shown, may I ask? I never spoke five words to her in the last ten years.'

'They must have been five very effective words,' said Sir James sardonically. 'There is no use your blinding yourself

to the truth, Blount. All the world knows she has had her eye on you for the past six years. Ask your niece if it isn't a fact.'

'Dear uncle, I am afraid it is only too true,' murmured Clarissa in tones of the deepest commiseration.

'I don't care where her eyes have been,' said Mr. Blount, now driven to desperation. 'Nothing on earth shall induce me to marry *anyone*. And——'

'It is just two o'clock,' said Pelham dismally.

'Ah!' said Sir James, with a start.

'Oh!' groaned John Blount from his heart.

'*And here she is!*' said Pelham in a low and freezing tone.

There was a simultaneous rush to the window. Yes—there she was!

Bonier, nosier, more angular than ever, with a portentous frown upon her brow, she drove up the avenue in full view of the unhappy culprits. She was seated in the high vehicle—of name and pattern unknown—that in her great-great-grandfather's time had been in use, and had been a second-hand purchase even then—and was evidently full of purpose.

Horror and dismay came in her train, and settled upon the little group standing in the window above her.

A cold dew came out upon Sir James's brow; Mr. Blount grew apoplectic; Clarissa looked thoroughly alarmed; while Pelham, standing behind them, was fighting with a wild desire for laughter.

'Blount,' said Sir James presently, 'I hope by this time you see what is the only honourable course left open to you. I hope you intend going down instantly to propose to that deeply injured lady.' Here he took the high and moral tone.

'A fig for honour,' said old Blount, with an irreverent snap of the first finger and thumb—misfortune rendering him depraved. '*You said you wanted a wife, and now——*'

'Miss Grant is in the drawing-room,' announced a servant at this moment with startling and abominable opportuneness.

'Blount, you had better go down and see her,' said Sir James.

'I won't,' replied Mr. Blount emphatically.

'You are a coward, sir.'

'I *am*, sir. Where that woman is concerned I confess myself devoid of pluck.'

'Pelham, what is to be done?' said his uncle, appealing

to him, with tears in his eyes. 'What can I say? I know if I go down that woman will marry me in spite of myself, as sure as I am here. Pelham, can't you do *something*?'

'I can,' said Pelham, taking Clarissa's hand and leading her up to the two old men. 'I will make a bargain with you. If you will consent to give Clarissa to me, and me to Clarissa, I will undertake to send Miss Jemima home in good temper, and restore to you the letter that has caused all this annoyance.'

Even *then* they hesitated; with destruction staring them in the face, they could not bring themselves to accept such conditions. They regarded each other fixedly, they wavered, and then——

An impatient bell rang loudly through the house. The drawing-room door (which was exactly opposite that of the library, in which they all stood, transfixed with horror) was thrown open, and the stentorian sound of Miss Jemima's lungs made itself heard.

'Is no one at home?' she asked, addressing a petrified attendant. 'Am I to be kept here all day? I shall not leave until I see Sir James King.'

Sir James turned a shade paler, and looked as though he could have fallen upon his friend's shoulder and wept through sheer funk, but for the appearance of the thing. There was a hushed pause.

'Miss Jemima seems impatient,' said Pelham suggestively. 'Am *I* to see her, sir—or will *you*?—or, perhaps, Mr. Blount——'

'Go, go. We give in. Hurry, boy.'

'Hurry, my dear, dear Pelham,' gasped the two delinquents. And Pelham, pressing Clarissa's hand, went out to interview the terrible person who was marching impatiently up and down the pretty drawing-room at the Park.

What he said to her, or how he said it, matters little. He triumphed. Either Miss Jemima was averse to matrimony with Sir James, or else the thought had never struck her; but she did not once touch on the subject of marriage, and flung the offending letter to the young man, on a slight hint from him, as though its near contact insulted her.

She certainly muttered something about a horsewhipping that was to come off in the market-place on the first available opportunity, in which *she* was to play the part of executioner, Mr. Blount that of victim; but even this vengeance she con-

sented to forego when the young lawyer's silver tongue had been brought to bear upon her.

Then she rose and made for the triumphal chariot that was to convey her back to the Grange.

In the hall, however, she made a last pause, and faced her companion.

'You may tell Sir James,' she said, in tones that struck cold to the hearts of the three listeners in the library, making them shiver in their shoes where they stood (I am ashamed to confess it), close to the keyhole, 'you may tell him it was *well* for him I did not make up my mind to accept the situation and marry him; for had I done so I should undoubtedly have led him to the altar, whether he liked it or not.'

'I don't doubt it, madam,' said Pelham meekly. 'I regret you did *not* think of it. I feel assured your acceptance of Sir James as a husband would now be the only thing that could console him for the grief he endures at having (however unintentionally) caused you the slightest annoyance. Perhaps—you still—might think of it?'—diffidently.

('Oh! scoundrel! he will spoil it all!' said Sir James, shaking his fist in the air in mingled fear and rage.)

'Go in, young man,' said Miss Jemima, 'go in. You are a fashionable liar—one of the worst things going. I dare say, if I encouraged you, you would tell me next you would find great happiness in marrying me yourself.'

'I should indeed,' said Pelham earnestly, 'but unfortunately I am well aware I am beneath your notice.'

('Oh, traitor!' murmured Clarissa.)

'You are a humbug,' said Miss Jemima, smiling grimly; and Pelham, having handed her courteously into the fossil remains of the family conveyance, went back to the library.

"And so I won my Geneviève—my bright, my beauteous bride," he quoted gaily, entering excitedly, and flinging the compromising letter to the two old gentlemen, who grabbed it with a thankful sigh.

And then he took Clarissa in his arms and kissed her boldly under the very noses of the scandalised old bachelors; while Clarissa blushed generously until she was all aglow as the heart of a summer rose, though none the less did she return the kiss with heartfelt interest.

'Never say I won't make my fortune at the Bar, uncle,' Pelham said laughing. 'To-day I have pleaded and won a

cause that you at least considered hopeless. Clarissa, I shall make a fortune for you yet.'

'No need, my boy, no need,' said Sir James, coming forward. 'Henceforth the Park is yours. I have had enough of matrimony.'

'And so have I,' said Mr. Blount, who still looked pensive. 'Clarissa, the Manor is yours.'

‘THAT LAST REHEARSAL.’

HE is standing with his back to the fire, his eyes bent upon the ground, lost in thought. So, evidently, are all the little dogs deep in contemplation as they lie all round him, with their chilly noses turned toward the cosy fire that laughs and crackles and leaps in mad enjoyment, although May is far advanced. At his feet the three rough terriers—Rum, Charlie, and Gip—snore luxuriously; on his right the setter pup blinks softly; on his left the fox-terrier, handsome Cheekie, dozes; while in the centre lies Crinkle, the small toy, wide-awake and evidently eager to challenge the world to single combat. This latter, when dispassionately considered, is but a melancholy creature—all legs, and no body to signify beyond an aspiring tail and two dejected ears. A forlorn thing, fit only for the tomb, but beloved of its master; so it lives, and its legs grow, and it prospers.

The clock ticks, the moments fly, the gilt hands point to half-past three. Just now a soft, distinct chime proclaims the hour, and Mr. Dynecourt, rousing himself, wonders vaguely what on earth he shall do. This thought is so perplexing that involuntarily he tightens his clasp upon the letter he holds in his left hand, and brings his foot down with some emphasis upon the hearth-rug. Probably he meant no offence, but all the little dogs resent the hurried movement, and, as though pulled by a universal string, rise and gaze reproachfully upon him. Their master takes no notice of their indignation, but with moody eyes seeks, as it were, to look into futurity.

At this moment the door opens, and a pretty creature, dressed in deep mourning, enters the room. Descriptions, like comparisons, are odious; therefore, I shall not describe my heroine, but will ask you to picture her to yourself as the very sweetest thing in all the world. Surely beauty lies not

in form or feature, but in expression; and she is tender, *riante*, provoking, *gracieuse*—all just as it suits her.

Mr. Dynecourt is twenty-six, and very much in love. Georgie Hamilton is seventeen, and very much in love too. But *he* is in love with her, and *she* is only in love with life and the freshness and fairness of this pleasant world.

As she enters now and advances up the long room, she smiles brightly. 'I have news for you,' she says with large, pleased, eager eyes. 'Do you know, Polly has five of the loveliest pups imaginable—regular darlings! All a deep brown and without a single spot.'

'Has she?' absently.

"'Has she?'" How very enthusiastic! What's the matter, Davy? Something is wrong, I know, and I'm sure it is in that letter. How I do hate letters!

'Yes, it *is* in the letter,' returns he, uncomfortably and somewhat forlornly. 'It is from your uncle, John Greaves, asking you—to go and live with them.'

'I sha'n't go,' says Miss Georgie promptly. 'Not likely. May I ask what put such a festive notion in his head? Am I not very well as I am?'

'That's just it,' crumpling the unlucky letter nervously while staring with fixed determination at Rum's silvery head. 'Your uncle doesn't think so. In fact, he thinks you shouldn't—live here any longer.'

'Not live here? In my *home*? And why?'

Mr. Dynecourt is beginning to feel distinctly ashamed of himself, and is inwardly hurling bad words at Uncle John for having compelled him to his present task.

'You see, two months ago it was different,' he begins desperately. 'Poor Aunt Hilyard was alive, and of course it was with her you lived, and all that; and—— But now Mrs. Stokes has left us your uncle is afraid people may talk if—if——'

'Why can't you speak?' interrupts she impatiently. 'I dislike people who hesitate, even more than people who "talk," as you term it. No—don't say another word: I understand perfectly. Oh,' sinking into a chair, 'what a nuisance it all is! and what on earth is to become of me?'

He is silent. He draws himself up with a quick movement, and opens his lips as though to speak, but checks himself resolutely, and as a further preventive to speech brings his teeth down sharply upon the end of his blond moustache.

'I certainly sha'n't go to Aunt Maud's,' goes on Georgie with decision; 'nothing shall induce me. I once spent a month there, and I'm not going to try it again. I don't fancy having Julia's perfections retailed to me half a dozen times a day, and I won't be treated as a baby when I am seventeen. I can't bear Aunt Maud. Do let me stay on here, Davy: what does it matter what anyone may say?'

'You could only stay on here in one character,' replies he quietly, though he pales a little and regards her searchingly.

'And that is——'

'As my wife.'

'Well then, I *will* be your wife,' decides Miss Hamilton with flattering haste, though perhaps there is something not altogether satisfactory in the air of self-sacrifice that accompanies the little speech. Then she stops short, and laughs rather awkwardly. 'I forgot,' she says, looking down and trifling with her white fingers. 'Pardon me: I forgot *you* might not view the idea in quite such a cheerful light as I do.'

'You must be blind,' he says, coming forward and speaking quickly, 'if you can have any doubt on that subject. I love you, Georgie: surely you know that. But I know you do not love me in—in that way; and I would not hurry or tempt you into a marriage that later on you might bitterly repent.'

'I shouldn't,' calmly; 'I am sure of it. Why do you always imagine unpleasant things?'

'If I could be quite sure you knew your own mind—that you really *wished* to marry me,' says he anxiously, some degree of hope rising in his mind as he listens to the seeming earnestness of her words.

'You may be *quite* sure,' returns she reassuringly. 'I would do *anything* to escape Aunt Maud.'

He drops her hand abruptly and walks back to his old position on the hearth-rug. 'No: it is out of the question,' he says. 'You do not care for me, and I would not do you such an injury as to marry you under the circumstances.'

'Then *don't*,' she says petulantly; and, turning to the window, lets her eyes wander tenderly, lingeringly, over the lovely parks and uplands that seem to swell and glow beneath her gaze. For six happy years she has called them home; day by day they have grown dearer; surely, they are more to her than they can ever be to him, who has spent all

his life abroad, and has only enjoyed their sweets for the past eight months. Yet now he will remain here undisturbed, in full possession, while she——

At this point she lets one hand smite the palm of the other sharply, and, turning with a little passionate gesture from the window, faces him. 'What am I to do?' she says. 'At least help me to think, as by your decree I *must* leave my—home.'

Her eyes fill; her lips tremble slightly; her hands fall together with an involuntary movement and clasp each other closely. 'I will not go to my aunt's,' she says quickly. 'I have money: why should I not take a cottage—the Elms, for instance—and live by myself, or with some nice old lady?—though, as a rule, I hate old ladies.'

'That is a good thought,' says Dynecourt eagerly, some light coming back again into his eyes. (If this can be accomplished she will at least be always near him; that is, until—— Here the glad light fades again suddenly, and Melancholy once more marks him for her own.) 'It can be managed, I dare say, if your uncle gives consent. I know an old lady, a friend of my aunt's, who would, I am sure, be glad to come to you. Yes, it might be arranged, and—the Elms would exactly suit you.'

'As well as any other place,' with a shrug of her pretty shoulders. 'You have refused to marry me, and you have turned me out of doors; therefore I must needs be content with the lesser goods the gods provide.'

'Georgie,' exclaims he angrily, keen reproach and pain in his tone, 'how dare you speak to me like that? How have I deserved it at your hands? It is unlike you to be unjust.' He is gazing down with tender severity upon her wilful, provoking face; and at last, when she can endure the intensity of his regard no longer, she raises her head, and, meeting his eyes, lets her mouth relax into a soft, irresistible smile. But he is too hurt and sad at heart to return the smile, and presently she becomes aware that his eyes are full of tears.

'I have vexed you,' she says remorsefully, slipping her slender fingers into his: 'forgive me. I am bad to you always. But one cannot be amiable for ever, and just now I am angry with Mrs. Grundy because she will not let me be happy in my own way; and I think I am a little angry with you too. It isn't the pleasantest thing in the world to propose to some one and be ignominiously *rejected*. Now, is it?'

'My darling, how can I act differently? You are only a child: you do not know your own mind yet. A time might come when—— No, it would be madness towards both of us to marry you without being fully assured of your love.'

'Would it? And yet I know I like you better than anybody I ever met,' persists she, a little wistfully.

'That is saying nothing, you know so few. But listen, Georgie. Let a year go by: at the end of twelve months, if you still wish to marry me, I shall say to myself, "She loves me!" If not—why then,' sadly, 'I shall know how wise I was to-day. In the mean time promise me one thing,' says Dynecourt earnestly, closing his hand tighter upon hers—'that whenever you feel yourself growing—*interested*—in anyone, you will tell me of it *instantly*.'

'I promise,' with faint surprise in look and tone.

'You will not hide it until it is too late?'

'Certainly not. Of course,' with a little mocking smile that irradiates her whole face, 'you are alluding to George Blount, or perhaps to Captain Stannus, who, I hear, is expected at the Grange next month.'

'I may be,' replies he quietly, though some slight discomposure betrays itself in his manner as she mentions the last name. 'I have your promise, however—have I not?—that you will give me timely warning of the very first sign of tenderness you feel.'

'I promise faithfully,' returns she laughingly, 'though I know you are imagining what will never come to pass.'

A fortnight has come and gone. Uncle John has given in: so has Aunt Maud with startling amiability. It is a settled thing that for the future Miss Hamilton is to be mistress of her own actions *and* the Elms (a picturesque cottage, without an elm within a mile of it), while the Park loses its sweetest inmate, and Dynecourt grows to almost detest the beautiful place, that now, in Georgie's absence, seems bereft of its chief charm.

Gradually the long drawing-rooms assume the unlovely look of all rooms in which no humanity lingers: the dining-room grows gaunt, the galleries ghostly. Only the library retains in part its old appearance, as here its master sits at night, brooding sadly over her he loves.

Yet, of all rooms in the house, this perhaps is the one most haunted by her presence. In each huge arm-chair he sees a slender lissome figure lounging; from behind each

hanging curtain a charming face peeps gaily; over every table a sleek head is bending, reading or drawing or working as the silent apparition chooses.

At last the terrible loneliness becomes unbearable—so much so that it drives Mr. Dynecourt down to the cottage at all sorts of unreasonable hours, where he is received with such *empressement* by Georgie as makes good Mrs. Wright—the old lady who has come to take charge of her—wonder nervously whether such incessant intercourse is strictly proper. In *her* young days it had not been so, &c. &c.

As for Georgie, she pines persistently for her lovely Park, and regrets every hour she lives her enforced exile from it. Once, about three weeks after her change of residence, loitering amongst the flowers alone with Davy (having eluded Mrs. Wright's vigilance), she turns to him and says suddenly, with some childish bitterness and envy, 'Well, and are you happy, now you have the Park all to yourself?'

'Does that speech deserve an answer?' reproachfully. 'Take it, however. I am as miserable as I well can be. Every room and hall and corridor reminds me ceaselessly of—what I sorely miss each hour of the day.'

'I am glad of it,' wickedly. 'The more wretched you are, the more I shall enjoy it. I can never forgive you for having—refused me. *Such* an indignity! Even still my heart beats when I think of it.'

'You jest about what is cruel earnest to me.'

'What a tone!' laughing. 'You remind me of the frogs and those unpleasant boys. And yet, surely I have stated only bare facts; you *did* refuse me.'

'Ask me again when you can tell me honestly you love me.'

'What if I told you so now?'

'I shouldn't believe you.'

'No? Then what *is* love?' demands she, standing still before him in the centre of the path, framed in by glowing, fragrant roses, and gazing with calm inquiry, though somewhat mirthfully, into his grave eyes. 'I mean, how does one feel when one is in love?'

'You confess your ignorance?' asks he with a slight smile that is full of dejection and regret. 'Well, let me try to enlighten it. First, when one loves one has a passionate longing to be near the beloved—a sense of desolation when apart from her.'

'So?' says Georgie, raising her brows slightly. 'Now, don't you think—*please* do not believe me unsympathetic—but doesn't it occur to you that—that—it might grow slightly monotonous?'

'No, it does *not*,' emphatically. 'To *you*, of course, it might.'

'Ah!' murmurs Georgie, gazing with expressive regret at her delicate, filbert-shaped nails.

'In the second place,' goes on Mr. Dynecourt, 'one is always absurdly jealous.'

'Is one? But, my *dear* Davy, how very dreadful! Do you not think jealousy a rather vulgar sentiment?'

'It may be, but it is at the same time a thoroughly natural and utterly unconquerable sentiment.'

'I'm absolutely certain *I* couldn't be made jealous,' says Georgie with uplifted chin. 'I flatter myself I am above all that. It is low and commonplace.'

'Perhaps you look upon love itself in the same light,' says he, a little bitterly. 'Remember, it too is commonplace.'

'No, no. I am not so sure of that,' returns she reflectively. 'Well, go on. Besides monotony and jealousy is there anything else?'

'As I regard it, yes. I think,' says this old-fashioned young man in a low tone that he firmly believes befits the occasion—'I think one would feel if one's dearest died that one must die too.'

'Well, now,' says Georgie in a clear, healthy, business-like tone, 'I don't believe a word of that. It is ridiculous: it is too much.'

'Didn't I say so? I told you beforehand you knew nothing about it,' says he hastily, a little indignation, a little disgust, and a good deal of pain mixed together in his voice. 'I do not expect you to agree with me, because *you* have never loved.'

'I dare say you think you know best,' says Miss Georgie with some just irritation, 'but I ask you to look round at these among our friends who have loved and see if you speak sensibly. There was Maud Eldon, for instance: when news came that Frank had been shot in that stupid Ashantee affair, did *she* droop and die? And yet they were quite devoted: we all knew that. And then there was Jane Newcome: did *she* find an early grave because poor George succumbed to that fever? She didn't. I never saw anyone grow so fat and

so—so *pleasant* as she has done of late. Then remember Mrs. Hartley's case: you know how awfully fond of each other she and Arthur were, and yet when he was brought home on a door to her from the hunting-field did *she* die? No: she only got married again. I must repeat it, Davy: I don't believe a word of it.'

'Of course, it isn't in one's power to die,' says Davy apologetically, feeling somewhat crushed by this heavy weight of evidence, 'but at least one would feel *anxious* to die.' It would seem the hardest part of one's misery that perhaps one couldn't. Now, I ask you, Georgie,' in a challenging tone, 'do you think you would feel anxious to die if I died?'

'How can I say?' perplexed, letting her rounded cheek sink into her pahn. 'It is so hard to be sure.' Then suddenly: 'How can I think about it at all, when you are alive and well, and so very near to me?' she says sweetly, moving a degree closer to him and turning upon him the softest, tenderest smile imaginable.

But this smile, that might reasonably be believed capable of melting an iceberg, fails in its purpose. Mr. Dynecourt distinctly declines to be melted, and, fearing to meet her eyes, looks resolutely over her head towards the distant hills beyond, behind which the golden sun is sinking slowly, slowly, emitting in his dying agonies a yellow haze that covers all the land.

'Pshaw!' he says impatiently, 'why do you bring *me* into the question? I was speaking generally. And—you do not know what love means. How should you? You are but a child.'

At this allusion to her age Miss Hamilton is very properly offended. Wrath grows within her violet eyes, making them larger, darker, more intensely expressive (if possible), than they were before.

'*Child!*' she says. 'Oh, yes, without doubt I am only a child; and I am very glad of it too, as it is a good thing to be young. But I suppose one can't be a child always, and perhaps you have forgotten that I am seventeen. And as to love, you say I know nothing about it; and I hope I never shall, because, if your description of it be a correct one, it must be the most uncomfortable, absurd, and *detestable* thing in the world.'

This vehement speech, I need scarcely say, ends the conversation. Mr. Dynecourt disdains to reply, and turns his attention with renewed interest upon the distant landscape.

Presently, however, his meditations are brought to an ignominious close. Georgie, springing to her feet, apparently forgetful of recent wrath, seizes him eagerly by the arm, and by an animated glance brings him to his feet. 'Let us run,' she says with the utmost *bonhomie*, as though their late passage-at-arms had never occurred. 'I see Mrs. Wright looming in the dim vista of the future, and her coming means platitudes, mild expostulations, and shawls. Let us escape while we may.'

With this she turns the corner hastily, and he following, as in duty bound, they presently find themselves in an obscure arbour, mouldy and earwiggy, but secure.

Georgie, seating herself at the rustic table, lets her chin fall into her hands and silently contemplates her companion, who is looking his severest, and is crushing without remorse the 'starry jessamine' that climbs the arbour's sides as he leans against it.

'How quiet you are!' she says at length with a slightly provoking smile, being in a teasing humour. 'Is it your temper or your toothache? Speak to me, Davy.'

'I am afraid you don't like Mrs. Wright,' he says, 'and it must be unpleasant for you, living with her, and that——'

'Not in the least: I like her very much, but I don't love her, that is all. She is tiresome, poor soul! and *will* think I have a delicate chest.'

'She is a very good woman.'

'That is just it,' demurely.

'What is?'

'Her being so good. She is *too* good: that is her great fault. She is the most perfect woman I ever met, and I don't like perfect people: they disagree with me. Oh, that one could find a flaw somewhere! But one looks for it in vain. There are no exceptions to her rules, and she is never wrong. Good people are very disagreeable: I prefer the other sort myself.'

'You make me wish myself of the other sort,' says he smiling.

'Don't wish yourself different: you are the happy medium. But Captain Stannus, *he* is *quite* of the other sort.'

'You have met him?' turning with a palpable start to examine her features. 'When? where?'

'Last night, at the Grange: you know he was expected there,' colouring distinctly, though faintly. 'I dined there:

did I not tell you? I dine there so often it scarcely impresses me. Mrs. Blount came herself at six o'clock, and made me walk back with her, as she said she was most anxious I should meet her brother.'

'No doubt.'

'He is very handsome, and was very agreeable and—attentive and pleasant.'

'Was he?'

'Yes.'

'Go on, Georgie: you have something more to tell me.' He has turned his face from hers, and is unconsciously reducing to ruin a branch of the jessamine that has foolishly wandered within his grasp.

'Not much. Only once, you know, you made me promise if I ever felt interested (was not that the word?) in anyone, I was to let you know directly. You remember?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Well,' with a slightly embarrassed laugh, and a blush that deepens every moment by fine degrees upon her pretty cheeks, 'I think I rather like this new friend. We had dancing in the large hall after dinner, and he danced with me all the evening, and said a good many charming things. And *he* didn't tell me I was a silly child. And altogether we had a lovely time.'

She stops with another little laugh at her Americanism, but Dynecourt makes no reply. She cannot see his expression, and, as his silence troubles her, she rises, and coming to his side slips her hand through his arm. 'Have I vexed you?' she says: 'do you really care? Of late I have thought—not. You scold me so much, and look so sadly at me sometimes. Perhaps, after all,' with a little sigh, 'I *am* only a silly child. Mind, I am not sure that I feel even the faintest interest in this new-comer; only it certainly did occur to me that he was good to talk to, and I liked his way of dancing. And you know you made me promise faithfully to tell you of the very first sign of——'

'I know,' interrupts he impatiently in a compressed tone, taking no notice of the white little hand that is so gently pressing his arm.

'To-morrow night,' she goes on earnestly, 'I shall be dining there again, and——'

'Again?'

'Yes. Are you not to be there? George said he would

ride down this afternoon to ask you: I suppose you missed him.'

'It doesn't matter: I sha'n't go.'

'Not when I am going to be of the party?' reproachfully.

'No,' brutally.

'Well, you must please yourself about that, of course,' with a flattering sigh. 'But I was going to say to you that when to-morrow night is past I shall know more positively whether I really like Captain Stannus or not. Come here on Friday and I will tell you all about it.'

Dynecourt smiles in spite of himself. 'And yet you were indignant a moment since because I said you were a child!' he says half musingly. 'I keep you to your bargain. On Friday I shall be here to learn my fate.'

He leaves her presently, and goes home full of sad forebodings, as miserable as any woman could desire. All the evening (that seems so interminable) he fights with his fears, and refuses to find comfort in his choicest cigars. Dinner is an abomination, bed a mockery.

Every hour of the succeeding day he torments himself afresh, and as twilight falls almost makes up his mind to waive ceremony and, in spite of the refusal sent, dine at the Grange, if only to judge with his own jealous eyes what amount of favour Stannus is finding in the eyes of his beloved. But pride and obstinacy prevail. No! he will not interfere in any way: let her give her heart to this stranger if she will; let this fancy, born of a few hours, grow and supplant the affection that has lasted for years. And so on and on.

As Friday morning deepens into noon his mood becomes even more depressing. Why fight against fortune? Why seek to compel fate? Why go to the Elms at all, to hear what he already knows too well? Better take the next train to town, or shut himself up in his private den, or *die* first.

Five minutes after making a solemn choice between these three evils he finds himself in the hall, gazing with gentle meditation into his hat. Whether he has mistaken time and place, and is about to say a prayer into it, will never be known, but presently he draws himself up, and, as though hardly conscious of the act, places the hat firmly on his head. After which, still with the abstracted look upon his face, he opens the hall-door and takes the road that leads to the Elms.

Whilst yet at a distance from that paradise he sees standing at its gate a very gracious figure, evidently on the look-

out for somebody. Coming nearer, he can see it is Miss Georgie herself, clad in a marvellous costume and innumerable smiles.

'It is all right,' she cries gaily at the top of her fresh young voice, running to greet him. Then, as they meet, she leaves her hand in his as she goes on to tell him her story. 'I don't care in the least for him,' she says: 'he is rather a prig. I found out all about it at once. You know you said jealousy was a chief ingredient, and last night it so happened that I offended his lordship early in the evening so grossly that he declined to notice me afterwards. He would not even ask me to dance, but devoted himself to that pretty Miss Hanley, and, would you believe it, I didn't mind it in the least: in fact, it amused me. So, you see, I don't care a bit for him.'

'Sulky beast!' says Mr. Dynecourt with withering contempt, but in the cheeriest of tones.

'Yes, isn't he? As you weren't there,' with a reproachful glance, 'I consoled myself with George Blount, and enjoyed myself immensely. Now, aren't you glad?'

This question is asked so naïvely, and his relief is so great, that he bursts out laughing. His companion joins in merrily.

'Glad doesn't express it,' exclaims he. 'I cannot tell you what a miserable time I have put in since last I saw you. My darling, how pretty you are looking this morning! And isn't that a very charming dress you are wearing?'

Naturally, this pleases her, and she instantly proceeds to tell him all about this desirable gown—where she got it, who made it, and the exact amount of the bill sent in to her by Elise. Whilst imparting all this information to her puzzled hearer she induces him in the most artful manner to tell her three distinct times how very becoming it is to her. Feeling at last satisfied that he is thoroughly impressed by her very charming appearance, she thinks fit to change the conversation.

She is in one of her kindest humours, so that when his visit of two short hours has drawn to a close she makes him a noble offer of her company as far as the gate. On their way thither she says, 'When next you are asked to the Grange you must come: it is a very pleasant house and great fun, and I like to see you there. But,' with a swift glance from under her long lashes, 'you mustn't dance so much with

Florence Blount as you did the last night we were there together in poor auntie’s time. Do you remember?’

‘Hardly.’

‘What a politic answer! You know you danced all night with her. By-the-by,’ with a charming assumption of indifference, ‘does she dance well?’

‘Very well,’ replies he with all a man’s hopeless stupidity.

‘Really?’ Then, after a suspicious pause, ‘I shouldn’t have thought it. She looks heavy.’

‘She has rather too good a figure to be called “heavy,” I think,’ still more stupidly.

‘A charming figure!’ stiffly. ‘I like people inclining towards *embonpoint* myself: they are much more worthy of admiration than meagre little creatures like—like *me*, for instance. She is very handsome, too, isn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ absently. He is thinking of anything in the world but Florence Blount, but how can she know that?

‘*Very* handsome?’ says she with uncalled-for energy. ‘Altogether, I think she would make a very suitable wife for you.’

‘Georgie!’ rousing himself from his pleasant day-dreams—in which his companion of the moment bears so large a part—with a palpable start.

‘Yes, why not? You think she dances divinely, has the loveliest figure you ever saw, and is the handsomest woman in the world.’

‘Did I say all that?’

‘Every word, and more. So, I see no reason why you should not marry her.’

‘Except the simple one that I love another,’ replies he coldly, feeling some anger at her heartless suggestion.

‘I don’t believe you do,’ says she pettishly, though considerably mollified. ‘At least, you never tell me you think *me* good to look at.’

‘Why should I bore you by telling you over and over again what you know so well already?’ impatiently. ‘Good-bye, Georgie: I have evidently tired you out. I must really go.’

‘You are cross,’ says Miss Georgie coaxingly, ‘but don’t go for a little minute, it is so long since I have seen you.’

‘What a humbug you are!’ smiling. ‘As if you could forget that only one day has passed since our last meeting!’

‘I forget everything when I am with you,’ says this coquette archly. Then there is a pause, and then she says,

very softly and with an air of the utmost importance, 'Davy!'

'Well?' says Davy, stopping short, and feeling sure some dark secret is about to be disclosed.

'I want to ask you a question,' taking hold of a button on his coat and twisting it nervously, to its serious detriment.

'Then ask it, darling,' very anxiously.

'Do I or Florence Blount dance best?'

Mr. Dynecourt, though strongly tempted to give way to merriment at this solution of her gravity, with a wisdom beyond his years refrains. 'You, decidedly,' he says with emphasis.

'You are sure?'

'Positive.'

'There is something else. A moment since you said you thought her *very* handsome.'

'Did I? I don't believe——'

'Yes, you did. Now, don't you think—her nose—a little large, eh, Davy?' with a faint laugh and some embarrassment. 'Do say you think her nose the largest you ever saw.'

'Quite the largest,' with comforting conviction—'utterly out of all proportion.'

'I fully agree with you,' with a delicious laugh. 'And her figure? It is very fat, isn't it?'

'Abominably so.'

'And you hate fat women?'

'I simply loathe them: I only care for "meagre little creatures" like—you.'

'Rude boy! But, honestly, you think me prettier than she is?'

'A thousand times prettier. My darling child, what an absurd question! She is not fit to be named in the same day with you.'

'Ah, now I shall say good-bye really, my dearest Davy, says Miss Hamilton with considerable *empressement*, tendering to him both her friendly little hands, that return undisguisedly his farewell pressure.

Mrs. Blount of the Grange is a very clever woman—not only clever, but sensible, two things that don't always go together—and is devoted to her stepbrother, Captain Stannus.

The captain is handsome and susceptible: Miss Hamilton, according to Mrs. Blount's lights, is handsome and suscep-

tible also. Why should not two handsome, susceptible people be brought together, and by a little judicious management be united in heart and fortune? I think when Mrs. Blount got to this point in her meditations she put the fortune before the heart, as being the more important thing of the two. Miss Hamilton’s fortune is considerable—almost as pretty as herself; the captain’s is inconsiderable, being indeed of the Mrs. Harris order, vague and shadowy. Beyond all doubt, Georgie would make a very suitable wife for dear Fred.

Nothing can exceed Mrs. Blount’s kindness. She gives the little mistress of the Elms to understand that the Grange is her home whenever she may wish to visit it. She is positively unhappy if a whole day passes without bringing her a glimpse of darling Georgie. The county (especially the mothers of nice young men) admires her conduct immensely, and tells her with a smile how very charming it is of her to be so attentive to the little orphaned girl. It says a few other things too—behind her back, and without a smile—but these of course she does not hear.

Fred at first proves somewhat refractory, being rather averse to matrimony, even with an heiress, and openly disinclined to ‘range’ himself for years to come. But when a fortnight has drawn to a close he discovers, to his everlasting chagrin, that his heart is no longer in his own possession, but safe in Miss Georgie’s keeping. Against his will he has fallen a victim to the charms of the pretty heiress, and knows he would accept her gladly in the morning were she without a penny.

About this time it occurs to Mrs. Blount’s fruitful brain that it is better to bring matters to a crisis without further delay. She takes into consideration the effect of private theatricals upon a budding attachment, and mentally decides that the frequent rehearsal of a love-scene must be conducive to the desired result.

So private theatricals are arranged to take place at the Grange on the 3rd of August, and everyone for ten miles round is invited to witness them. Georgie of course is to act; so is Stannus; so is Florence, the eldest daughter; so is Dynecourt, but he, unfortunately, has business that will keep him in London a good deal just at this time, so is not available, and some one else is selected for his part. He will return to the county, however, the day before the all-important event, and will gladly stay at the Grange from

Monday till Wednesday, Tuesday being the day appointed for the performance.

Georgie is intensely delighted with the whole affair, and studies her part from morning till night. The play has been run through again and again, until at last everyone is declared to be almost—if not quite—perfect. There are rehearsals in the drawing-room, rehearsals in the library, rehearsals in the shrubberies, or any other place where chance may bring the actors together, and the house is turned upside down.

On Monday, when Dynecourt arrives, he finds chaos reigning and nobody to be found anywhere. Strolling through the rooms in search of Georgie (being filled with a desire to see her *riante* face light up as he gives her the costly trinket he has selected for her with such loving care in town), he comes to the door of one of the smaller conservatories, across which a heavy velvet curtain is hanging, and lifting it partially, looks in. As he looks his grasp involuntarily tightens upon the velvet, and his face whitens until his very lips are bloodless. Spell-bound, as though rooted to the spot, he gazes at the scene within.

In the centre of the stone floor stands Georgie, looking very lovely, very earnest, with her blue eyes full of tender longing, while at her feet kneels the gallant captain, evidently pleading passionately for the small hand he is holding so closely, fondly, between both his own. His face is tragic—perhaps a degree *too* tragic, if only rage and despair would allow Dynecourt to notice it. But the lover-like attitude is as nothing to what follows. At this luckless instant the captain speaks, addressing Georgie in a tone almost frenzied in its vehemence.

'Darling,' says the captain, 'for the last time I kneel to you, and entreat you to hear me. Do not, I pray you, let the adulation of another' ('That's *me*,' says Dynecourt savagely between his set teeth) 'blind you to the honest and heartfelt affection I offer you. In you are centred all my hopes of bliss. Do not condemn me to life-long misery, but say you will be mine.'

Dynecourt draws his breath hard, and waits with maddening impatience for the reply to this florid speech. It comes slowly, with evidently modest reluctance, from Georgie's pretty lips. Her head is downcast; her hand lies tranquilly in her companion's; she has turned her face a little to one side.

‘How can I answer you?’ she says in clear but trembling accents. ‘And yet why should I shrink from telling you the truth? Yes, I confess it: my heart has long been in your keeping, and, if you wish it, I am yours!’

Dropping the curtain with a smothered and rather highly-flavoured word Dynecourt turns away, grief and bitter disappointment at his heart. At last the dreadful awakening has come: she has discovered her heart is not her own to bestow or withhold at her pleasure. She is right, of course—quite right. Her love is not to be controlled as she thinks fit, but why had she not *told* him? To find such a child so skilful in the art of concealing chills him to his heart’s core; and he had believed her so true, so sweet, so unworldly! With apparently the face of a guileless girl she has proved herself old in the wiles and deceptions of the practised flirt.

Then a moment comes when he tells himself he is glad of his awakening, and pictures to himself the desolation of a life spent with one who would bear for him no love. But, somehow, it is a dismal gladness, that brings with it no consolation.

‘The adulation of another’: the words rankle. For the future he will spare her this ‘adulation’ that distresses, and probably annoys, her. Nor will he interfere with her appreciation of another’s ‘honest affection.’

Later on in the day, when they meet, his manner, though civil, is markedly cold and indifferent, while his demeanour towards Miss Blount, whom he takes in to dinner, is devoted, almost *prononcé*. He takes not the smallest notice of the pretty puzzled child, who watches him with great bewildered eyes, and tells herself a thousand times she must be dreaming. What has she done?

Then comes bed-hour, and everybody says good-night to everybody else, and still Dynecourt is so attentive to Miss Blount that he barely notices the small soft hand that is held out to him as its owner bids him good-night in somewhat troubled tones. So the cold farewell is said, and all separate; and two people at least in the house lie awake half the night through very wretchedness, and one cries bitterly until her richly-fringed lids are pink and sorrowful.

Next morning it is the same thing over again. At breakfast Dynecourt is seated next Florence, and is carrying on with her an animated discussion about toy terriers. He barely notices Georgie’s greeting, and then goes back to the terrier

question, as though the success of his argument is all he lives for.

Georgie's lips tighten, and a choking sensation rises in her throat. With a soft glance she turns to Captain Stannus, who is of course beside her, and talks to him all through breakfast, with a grace, a *verve*, unapproachable. Once, meeting two stern eyes fixed upon her from the opposite side of the table, she returns their glance with one of defiance that breathes of open war.

It is half-past eight: the guests have arrived, and Dynecourt in his side seat is gazing moodily into space, hardly aware that the curtain has risen and that the play has commenced.

There is the usual programme. Beauty; Beauty's true and disinterested admirer; true and disinterested admirer's villanous rival; the smart chambermaid; the funny man—all are here.

Dynecourt, glowering in his corner, declines to laugh at the funny man, and hardly deigns to notice the brilliant costumes that go such a long way in private theatricals.

Two scenes go off successfully, and the curtain at length rises on the third and last. It progresses. Beauty is being tenderly driven into a corner; the true and disinterested is gaining ground, until finally, with an energy worthy of even a better cause, he flings himself at Beauty's feet, and for the fourth time entreats her to look favourably upon his suit.

At this moment it occurs to Dynecourt, whose eyes are fixed upon the ground, that something not altogether unfamiliar to his ear is being said. He starts, grows a little pale, and turns his attention to the stage. Captain Stannus is on his knees, and has full possession of Georgie's hand. He is uttering an impassioned speech, the words of which fall clearly upon Dynecourt's ear.

'Do not, I pray you, let the adulation of another blind you to the honest and heartfelt affection I offer you——'

It is all only too palpable. Dynecourt gazes at the actors blankly, full of a horrible misgiving. Then comes Beauty's reply.

Georgie is perhaps not quite so well up in her part to-night as she was yesterday, when in the conservatory she rehearsed to an unseen audience. Her tone falters; her eyes are unsmiling; a curious expression of pain has fallen athwart, and somewhat mars, the joyousness of her usually *piquante*

face. For one brief instant her glance wanders, and, travelling over the heads of the listening guests, meets and questions Dynecourt. There is a world of disappointment and reproach in that tender glance, and then the long lashes droop, and the eyes return again to the suppliant before her.

Remorse, self-reproach, keen anger at his own folly, threaten to overwhelm Dynecourt, and would perhaps gain mastery but for the extreme feeling of relief that grows within him and permeates his whole being. He scarcely sees how the play ends, but as the curtain falls pushes his way triumphantly through the throng of applauders, and, crossing the hall, enters the impromptu green-room, where actors and actresses are all talking and laughing, and congratulating each other freely on the happiness of the whole affair. But the little figure so charming in its old-world finery has disappeared. Georgie is nowhere to be seen.

Florence Blount, resplendent in powder and patches, comes sailing towards him. She is of the large and fleshy type, and looks uncommonly well in powder—a fact of which she is fully aware. ‘Have you come to say something pretty to us?’ she says with her orthodox smile. ‘It is scarcely form—is it?—to force an *entrée* into our private room, but we forgive you. Oh, Georgie? Yes, how well she acted, but how painfully nervous she was just at last! Did you notice? She was hardly off the stage when she burst out crying, and said she felt tired and frightened. Poor little thing! She has gone to her room: Katie is with her, I fancy.’

‘Ah,’ says Dynecourt. If his life depended upon it he could not at this moment form a sentence. His eyes are lowered, his tone might mean anything.

‘Don’t you think you like old-fashioned plays?’ goes on Miss Blount vivaciously. ‘The dressing and that is so much more effective.’

Dynecourt murmurs something.

‘Oh, thanks, ever so many, but I am quite tired of hearing that. Yes, powder *is* becoming. I wish some great lady would adopt it for common use, and then we should all follow suit; and as for the patches, I really think I shall take to them without waiting for a lead from any great lady. Georgie? No, I am almost sure she will not come down again to-night. You see, she is so upset, nervous, what you will,’ &c.

Dynecourt, disappointed, impatient, turns away, and after

a decent delay frames a proper excuse and quits the house. He is conscience-stricken, and yet at heart more glad, more hopeful than he has ever been in all his life before.

It is evening, but very early evening ; as yet upon its borders the baby Night sits crouching, not daring to advance. All the earth is still : not a murmur, not a whisper from the distant ocean, that lies sweetly sleeping in the bay, comes to disturb the calm and tender silence of the dying day.

Suddenly upon the great quiet a little angry bark falls noisily, then another and another, and all Mr. Dynecourt's merry terriers, flinging themselves against the entrance-gate of the Elms, burst it open, and with one accord rush up the gravelled path. Their master follows them softly, hesitatingly, with a palpably guilty air.

The little dogs run on before, Charlie scampering well in front and barking vigorously, as is his wont. Coming to a certain corner, half hidden in the dusky shadows, they pause, and with a sniff of recognition bound towards it, where a slender figure upon a rustic seat reclines somewhat sadly.

The young man sees her too, and advances with singular reluctance. How will she receive his apologies, this pretty, passionate, ill-used child ? His heart beats with considerable rapidity as the small figure rises, and, coming quietly from out the gloom, holds out to him a cold, unfriendly hand.

'Good-evening,' she says icily. Her eyelids are suspiciously red, her head is bent.

'Good-evening,' replies he nervously ; and then speech forsakes him and her, and silence short but eloquent follows. At length he breaks it. 'I only came for a minute or two to ask how you are after Tuesday night's fatigue,' he says uncomfortably and rather disjointedly.

'How kind of you !' in a tone that strikes cold upon his heart. 'I am only pretty well, thank you. My head has ached horribly all day. It has got into my eyes, the pain, and made me wretched.'

'So I can see,' returns he gently, gazing with tender solicitude upon the tell-tale lids. 'Have you done nothing for it ?'

'Everything, but nothing has done me good,' with a faint touch of pettishness.

'Try eau-de-cologne,' says he, more because he can think of nothing else to say than from any strong belief in Johann Maria Farina.

‘ I have none : I used the last drop I possessed yesterday.’

‘ Let me go home for some,’ eagerly ; ‘ I sha’n’t be a moment, and——’

‘ Not for *worlds* !’ with unpleasant emphasis ; ‘ I would not give you so much trouble for anything. Do not go : I shall not use it if you do.’

‘ Oh, if you will not,’ returns he piqued, flushing darkly, ‘ of course I shall not do what is displeasing to you. Well, I shall not detain you longer : good-evening.’

‘ In such a hurry to reach the Grange ?’ puts in she quickly, childishly, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders.

‘ I am not going to the Grange, Georgie. Why do you speak to me like this ?’

‘ I wonder I speak to you at all,’ petulantly.

‘ So do I,’ haughtily ; ‘ talking always makes a bad head worse. Forgive me that I have kept you standing so long. Again good-evening.’

‘ Good-bye,’ returns she with suppressed meaning.

‘ Good-bye ? That is a dismissal,’ says he bitterly.

He holds out his hand, and she places hers within it. The little fingers he clasps are dry and burning. He holds them closely, silently watching her face, which she has studiously turned from his. ‘ At least accompany me to the gate,’ he says in a changed voice, out of which all the *hauteur* has vanished, leaving only grief and regret behind it.

She makes no reply, but with her face still averted and her hand still clasped in his moves beside him down the walk towards the gate.

Just as they reach it a little sob smites upon his ear, and then he knows that she is crying.

‘ Georgie ! Georgie ! what is it ?’ exclaims he in an agony, trying to meet her eyes, but with both her hands she has covered them very successfully.

‘ That horrible, odious, *detestable* Florence Blount !’ she says presently ; ‘ oh, how miserable she has made me ! But of course it is no wonder you should like her best ; she is so tall and handsome, while I—I am only small and insignificant, and so—so young !’

‘ Georgie, let me——’

‘ I do not blame you. But why did you tell me a lie the other day, when you said you thought me prettier than she ?’

‘ My darling ! my angel !’ says Mr. Dynecourt, taking her gently, gladly, in his arms, ‘ how can you be so foolish ?’

Don't you know every bit of heart I have is yours? And as to comparing you with that large overgrown woman of the world, my beloved, I would not do you such a wrong.'

'Then it isn't true? you are sure? you are certain?' asks Georgie, visibly brightening. 'Then how *could* you go on as you did the other night, sitting near her, and talking to her, and looking into her eyes, and—and behaving so abominably in every way?'

'Let me explain,' entreats the young man in a contrite tone; and then he does explain, and tells her all about that fatal rehearsal in the conservatory, and his despair and jealousy, and how he discovered his mistake and came up this evening to throw himself on her mercy, but was prevented by her coldness from making any explanation.

'Oh, how glad I am!' says Georgie with a deep sigh of relief. And then she throws her arms around his neck in the fulness of her joy, and lays her soft curly head upon his chest. 'Perhaps all has happened for the best,' she whispers, 'because until that Tuesday night I never really knew how much I loved you. But now I know.'

'How do you know, Georgie?'

'You remember all you said to me that day long ago about people who were in love. I didn't believe you then, but now I do. I know I should like to have you always near me,' with a little shy laugh and an adorable blush; 'and I should be dreadfully jealous if you liked anyone better than me; and'—the smile fading and tears coming into her eyes—'if you were to die I know I should die too, because I couldn't live without you.'

'My own darling!' says Dynecourt in a low unsteady voice, straining her to his heart.

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